

# Inside Social Life

Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology

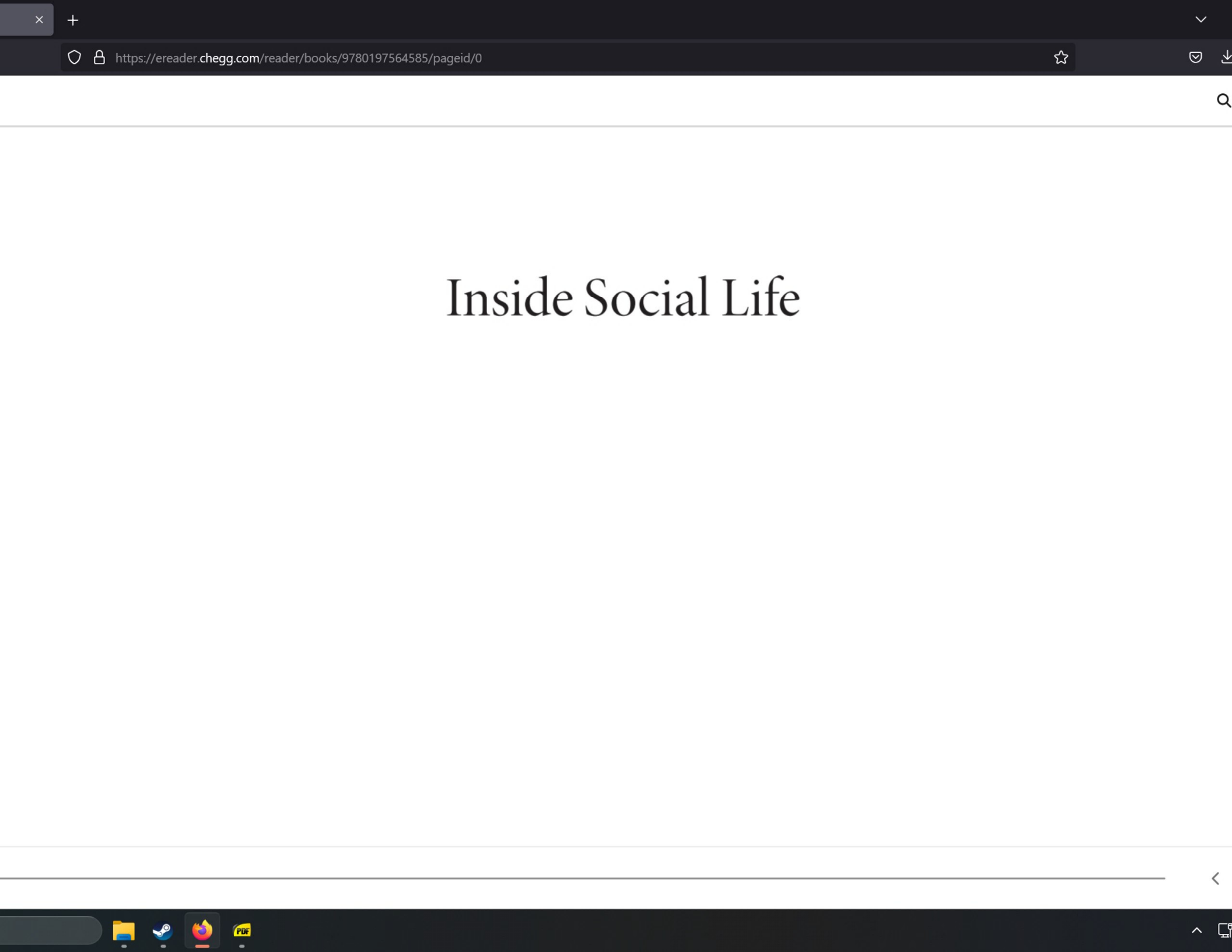


Spencer E. Cahill | Kent Sandstrom | Carissa Froyum

EIGHTH EDITION

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## Readings in Sociological Psychology and Microsociology

*Eighth Edition*

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*University of  
South Florida*

Kent Sandstrom

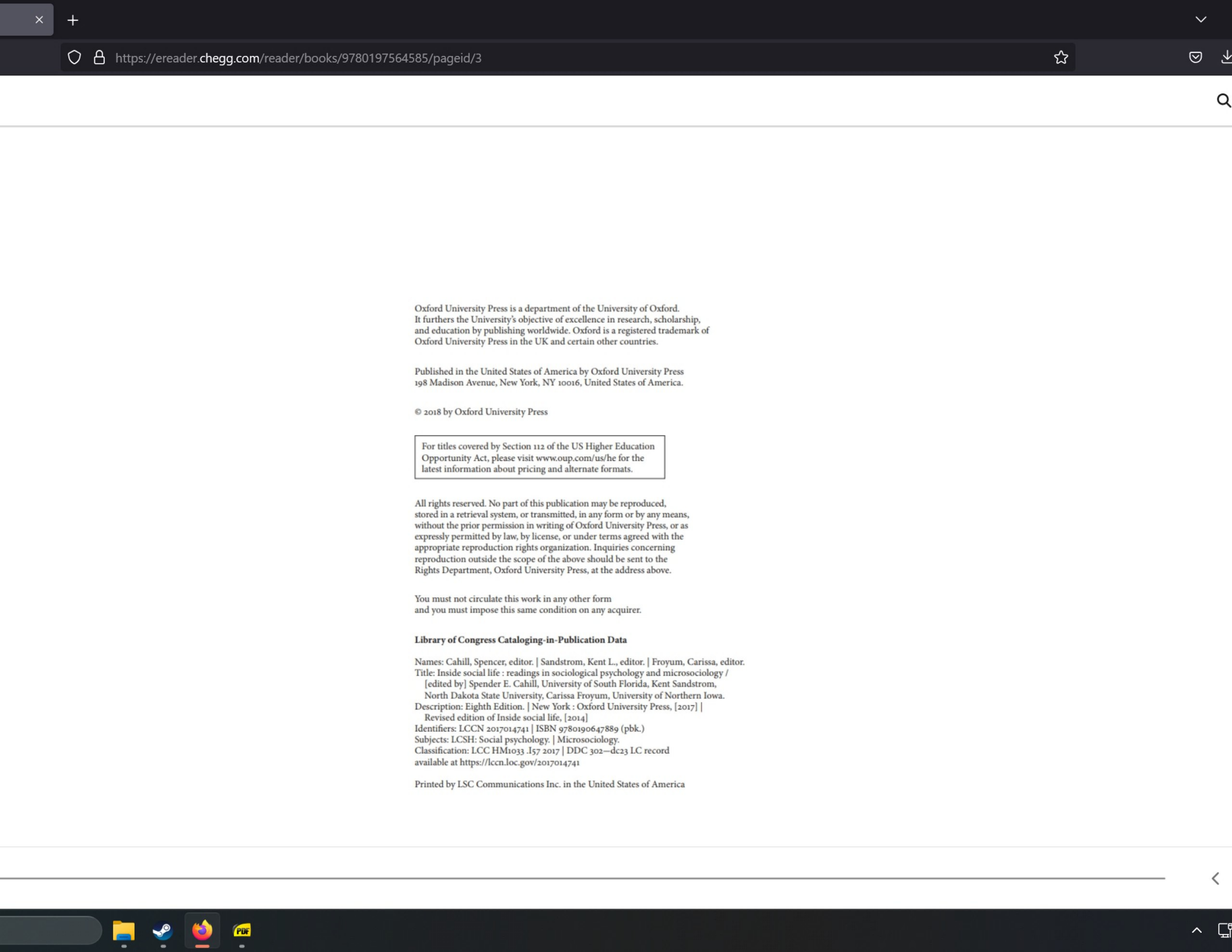
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## INTRODUCTION

Sociology examines a broad and diverse range of topics. Sociologists study everything from the operation of the global social system to how people manage emotions and identities in their everyday interactions. Given this topical range, many sociologists draw a distinction between macrosociology, or the study of broad patterns of social life, and microsociology.

Macrosociological studies provide a kind of aerial view of social life. They enable us to identify the distinguishing features of the social landscape. Yet, to understand the actual social processes responsible for such patterns of social life, we need to get closer to the ground—to the actual places where everyday social life is lived.

The study of everyday social processes and interactions falls within the purview of microsociology. Microsociology focuses on the daily details of how people create and sustain the social worlds they inhabit. These social worlds include preschools, classrooms, neighborhoods, hospitals, street corners, and social media sites. Microsociologists go to such places to observe and sometimes participate in the activities that occur there so that they can identify the social patterns that characterize them. Microsociologists also interview participants in depth to learn about the meanings that guide their conduct. Some even examine conversations in detail to investigate how particular social identities and situations are talked into being. In doing so, microsociologists strive to understand the processes that serve to produce and reproduce the social relationships, organizations, and systems that macrosociology studies in the abstract.

Many sociologists do not stop there but also look inside the hearts and minds of individuals who inhabit different social worlds. They examine relationships between people's social and subjective experience—their thoughts, feelings, and private views of themselves. Sociologists share this field of study with psychologists, and it is commonly referred to as *social psychology*. However, sociologists and psychologists generally approach the study of interrelations between social life and individuals' inner lives from different directions. Psychologists tend to look for the operation of universal principles of human psychology in social life, while sociologists consider the social variability of subjective experience to be more significant and informative. This difference in emphasis has led to the cumbersome expressions *sociological social psychology* and *psychological social psychology*. But there is a more economical way of distinguishing between these two approaches. Psychologists can retain the title of *social psychology* if sociologists claim the title of *sociological psychology* as their own. This latter expression clearly refers to a psychology based on a distinctively sociological understanding of the human condition in all of its varied forms.



## x INTRODUCTION

The concerns of microsociology and sociological psychology are not unrelated to those of macrosociology. Both types of study are essential for a comprehensive understanding of human social life. Although we, as individuals and groups, produce and reproduce the social worlds that we inhabit, we do not do so under conditions of our own choosing. Recurring patterns of interaction result in relatively stable features or structures of social life. For example, we routinely place one another into different gender, ethnic, age, and other categories, treating one another differently based on such identifications. Organized patterns of social life result in unequal distributions of resources and power among us. These distributions influence where we live and with whom we are likely to interact. Such social divisions and hierarchies or social structures influence interaction in ways that tend to lead to their perpetuation. As previously suggested, microsociology examines how we interactionally produce and reproduce the social divisions, organizations, institutions, and systems that macrosociology studies in the abstract. Microsociology and sociological psychology also address how social structures influence our social lives and subjective experiences differently. They thereby complement macrosociology and bring alive the study of human social life.

The readings collected in this volume provide an introduction to sociological psychology and microsociology. College students are often introduced to these fields of study in courses with titles such as Social Psychology or The Individual and Society. This volume is intended for them and for other readers who are interested in the inner workings of social life and how each of us influences and is influenced by it. The volume includes both statements of theoretical positions and empirical studies that draw and elaborate upon those positions.

Some of the selections included herein are classics of sociological psychology and microsociology. Others are more recent and have yet to weather the test of time. The combination of classic and more current readings is intended to give readers a sense of the intellectual roots of sociological psychology and microsociology, as well as their continuing vitality. The selections can be read in any order, although we have tried to arrange them so that they build on the ideas and empirical findings that have preceded each. In whatever order the articles may be read, our hope is that they convey an appreciation of the intricate artfulness of daily social action and the fascinating variety of human social experience.

### NEW TO THIS EDITION

This Eighth Edition of *Inside Social Life* updates the previous edition by creating tighter coherence within each of the nine parts, examining some of the critical issues of our day, and expanding the book's topical reach. We thought it especially important to address globalization and ethnicity, as well as the reality that we spend an increasing portion of our lives interacting through technology. We have included thirteen new selections that have not been used in previous editions. These selections address such topics as:

- How we socially construct reality.
- The emergence of closure as an important emotion, and the expectations for feeling and expression which accompany it.





- The socialization of black men to be “respectable” by controlling their emotions within a white-dominated space.
- How students negotiate taking ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) medication in order to perform academically while maintaining feelings of authenticity.
- The training of firefighters to ensure they fight fires according to organizationally produced guidelines, even in the face of death of other firefighters.
- The negotiation of new criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder in online discussions.
- How families and communities ensure their Latino children marry other Latinos.
- The framing of international surrogacy to cast it as empowering and liberating to Western families.
- How families cope with the murder of a loved one.

Additionally, we brought back three pieces from an earlier edition: one on neural plasticity, one on negotiating the self in rapidly changing contemporary life, and a classic piece on “identity talk” among homeless people. These pieces rounded out each part they are in when paired with our new selections.

Finally, we have updated three other features from the previous edition: introductions to each of the book’s nine parts, introductions to the selections, and study questions. The introductions to each book part identify the core themes, concepts, and insights that characterize the group of selections. They tie the readings in the section together in an easy-to-digest format for students, and they allow instructors to use the book as a stand-alone text for class. The introduction to the selections contextualize each reading so that students can identify key sociological psychology themes and concepts and integrate the readings across the book with each other. The reflective questions help students identify the key ideas addressed in specific readings and think about how these ideas could be applied to understand other arenas of social life. Reflective questions also allude back to concepts raised in the introduction for each reading so that students encounter key concepts in three different ways (summarized in the introduction, demonstrated in the reading, and interrogated in the reflective questions).

This volume is possible because of the support of many others. We were greatly aided in this revision by the comments and evaluations shared by colleagues and by instructors who have used previous editions. We are most grateful to David Trouille, James Madison University; Kathleen Grove, Palomar College; Gary L. Grizzle, Barry University; Patrick Archer, St. Ambrose University; Gary T. Deimling, Case Western Reserve University; Liza L. Kuecker, Western New Mexico University; Linda LiskaBelgrave, University of Miami; Denise Bullock, Indiana University; 2 anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive comments on the Seventh Edition. We would also like to thank Vicki Kessler, Adam Roise, Donilee Loseke, and Sherith Pankratz for the support and encouragement they have provided in completing the current edition of this volume. In this edition, we have again tried to emulate the passion, curiosity, and insight that characterized the work of Spencer Cahill, who died in 2006. We have also tried to be guided by Spencer’s uniquely perceptive sociological eye.





## USES OF THE SELECTIONS

*Inside Social Life* can be used effectively as a single assigned text. However, for instructors who wish to use this anthology to supplement another text, the following chart may be helpful. It groups the chapters in this volume by topics conventionally used to organize courses in social psychology and microsociology. Primary and secondary emphases are listed separately. (Parentheses indicate an alternative primary use for a chapter.)

Topic	Primary Emphasis	Secondary Emphasis
Cognition and Perception	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, (14)	7, 12, 16, 23
Emotions	7, 8, 9, 10, (31), (33)	14, 30, 36, 38
Bodies and Embodiment	11, 12, 13, 14, (6)	9, 10, 23, 25, 38
Self and Identity	15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, (14), (27), (30), (34), (37)	11, 13, 27, 32, 36, 39
Socialization	1, 4, 10, 11, 27	15, 16, 20, 30, 33, 35
Social Interaction	19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, (1), (9), (10), (30), (35)	11, 17, 29, 33, 37
Power, Inequality, and Social Reproduction	10, 11, 17, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, (30), (39)	12, 14, 20, 29, 36, 37
Culture	1, 4, 26, (7), (8), (13), (18), (21), (25), (27), (38)	14, 17, 20, 23, 24, 31, 30, 33, 34, 35, 37
Social Structures and Institutions	30, 31, 29, 30, (33)	10, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 30, 34, 36, 39
Gender and Sexuality	9, 11, 12, 20, 38	35, 39
Race, Ethnicity, and Class	10, 17, 22, 26, 30, 32, 33, 35, 37, 39	13
Deviance and Social Control	36, 37, (10), (26), (29)	8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 25, 30
Social Problems	10, 17, 22, 26, 28, 29, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39	8, 14, 20, 30, 32, 33
Social Change	18, 29, (2), (34)	23, 31, 37, 38



## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Patricia Adler** is Professor Emeritus of sociology at the University of Colorado. She is the author of *Wheeling and Dealing* (1985) and coauthor (with Peter Adler) of *Paradise Laborers* (2004), *The Tender Cut* (2011), and *Drugs and the American Dream* (2012, also with Patrick K. O'Brien).

**Peter Adler** is Professor Emeritus of sociology at the University of Denver. He is the coauthor (with Patricia Adler) of *Backboards and Blackboards* (1991), *Paradise Laborers* (2004), *The Tender Cut* (2011), and *Drugs and the American Dream* (2012, also with Patrick K. O'Brien).

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**Herbert Blumer** (1900–1987) was a prominent advocate for the sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism and Professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, before his death. Among his many articles and books, the most widely read is *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (1969).

**Spencer E. Cahill** (1949–2006) was Professor of sociology at the University of South Florida and editor of the first five editions of this volume. He was also the author of *Children and Society* (2006) and co-editor of *The Praeger Handbook of American High Schools* (2006). In addition to publishing these books and dozens of journal articles, Dr. Cahill served as editor of *Social Psychology Quarterly*, as co-editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, and as a leader in the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction.



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**Erving Goffman** (1922-1982) was the Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and president of the American Sociological Association at the time of his death. His many highly influential books include *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), *Asylums* (1961), *Relations in Public* (1971), and *Frame Analysis* (1974).

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## PART

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# Human Being and Social Reality

The study and understanding of any subject must start with something—with some general ideas about that subject. The subject of sociological psychology and microsociology is human experience, in both its shared and private forms. Thus, sociological psychology and microsociology must start with some general ideas about human nature, human experience, and social existence. The selections in this section advance some ideas about these fundamental questions. Taken together, they provide the conceptual foundations on which a study of human social life and experience can be built. In doing so, they highlight the following themes:

- *By adopting a sociologically informed perspective, we can gain a unique understanding of ourselves and the social worlds we occupy.* We can understand how we create the realities that shape our everyday lives, how we acquire culture and connect with others, how we fashion and realize identities, how we exercise power, and how we construct and perpetuate social patterns and inequalities. Perhaps most crucially, a sociological perspective helps us to develop an in-depth understanding of how and why we think, feel, and act in the ways we do, particularly by enabling us to see how our thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by our social positions and relationships.



2 PART I. HUMAN BEING AND SOCIAL REALITY

Through acquiring this understanding, which C. Wright Mills described as the “sociological imagination,”<sup>1</sup> we can become more thoughtful, informed, and responsible members of our communities. When we apply the sociological imagination, we can make more conscious choices about when, how, and why we should comply with or resist social expectations.

- *Human nature is relatively “plastic” and open-ended.* Some scholars assert that almost all human characteristics are products of genetic inheritance. Others argue that people are almost totally products of their experience. This disagreement is often described as the “nature versus nurture” debate, as if human biology and experience were easily separable. Although some scholars still embrace either biological or environmental determinism, a growing number of biological and social scientists recognize that most human characteristics result from complex interactions between biological processes and experience. Probably the most telling research in this regard is that which focuses on human neural plasticity, or how the human brain responds to its social environment and experiences.

The authors of the selections in Part I recognize the plasticity and “world-openness” of our human biological make-up. That is, they recognize that we are not born with genetic or instinctual hard wiring that dictates how we will act in our social and physical environments. Instead, we have a relatively open-ended biological constitution characterized by highly unspecialized and undirected drives. For instance, even our drives to eat and reproduce are guided by our culture. We must learn when, where, how, and what we should eat. We must also learn when, where, how, and why we should have sex. Because of our biological openness, human nature can manifest itself in an incredibly diverse number of ways. Indeed, sociologists point out that the ways of being and acting human are as numerous as the thousands of cultures that exist on our planet.

Most important, due to the plasticity of our brains and biological constitutions, we must learn how we fit into the world and how we should respond to the natural and social realities that make up this world. In doing so we must rely on the meanings and guidelines we acquire from the society into which we are born. In essence, then, we can only learn our place in the world, and how to act in it, through interacting with others who expose us to culture, or a widely shared system of social meanings, standards, and guidelines.

- *Reality is socially constructed and human behavior is guided by social meanings.* The selections in Part I advance ideas that are consistent with the arguments of Herbert Blumer, the founder of the sociological perspective known as symbolic interactionism. Blumer emphasized that if social scientists want to understand human behavior, they must understand how people construct and define reality. More specifically, they must consider how we define the



things we encounter in our environment. These things do not have a fixed or intrinsic meaning. Rather, their meanings differ depending on how we interpret and respond to them. For example, the thing we call a “tree” will have a different meaning depending upon whether we identify it as something to chop, climb, decorate, prune, or turn into lumber. If you cut down a tree, chop it into smaller pieces, and burn it in a fireplace, it becomes “fuel.” On the other hand, if you take it into your house, put it in a stand, and trim it with lights and ornaments, it becomes a holiday “decoration.” A tree has different meanings depending on how we define and respond to it. In the same way, a person will mean different things to us and call out different responses depending upon whether we define him or her as a teacher, parent, lover, terrorist, or friend. The crucial factor, then, is how we name, or give meaning to, the things we encounter because that will shape our actions toward them.

In pointing out how our behavior is directed by the meanings we give to things, Blumer also emphasized that these meanings derive from and emerge through our social interaction. Put simply, we learn what things mean through interacting with others. In this process we rely heavily on language and the shared system of symbols it provides. Guided by language and the processes of communication and role taking it facilitates, we learn how to define and act toward the objects, events, and experiences that constitute our environment. We thus learn to see and respond to symbolically mediated realities—realities that we name, such as friend, party, college, dorm, car, and football game. These realities are socially constructed. In other words, they are jointly created and sustained by us, especially as we use language and engage in ongoing conversations with others. Through these conversations, we establish a correspondence between the shared and seemingly “objective” reality of society and our subjective experience as individuals.

- *Language both constrains and enables human perceptions and actions.* On the one hand, language profoundly conditions how we see, interpret, and respond to the world, particularly by providing us with a *social lens*—a shared system of meanings and classifications—through which we organize our perceptions of reality. Guided by this lens, we learn how to shape the world into distinct categories, thereby giving order to our experiences and our relations to the environment. We also learn how to ignore, overlook, or disregard some features of the world and people around us. Yet, while language organizes our experience and thus constrains our perceptions and actions in some ways, it also provides us with a vital resource—a system of symbols—that enables us to have agency, or the capacity to act freely. Through acquiring and using symbols, we can think, remember, make plans, imagine alternatives,



transcend the here and now, communicate with others, and most crucially, exercise a notable element of choice in crafting our actions.

- *The nature of social reality has changed significantly in recent years.* The author of the first selection in this book, Kenneth Gergen, is a proponent of “postmodern” social theory. Postmodern theorists argue that we live in a new and distinctly different social world marked by unprecedented social, economic, and technological change. Western societies are characterized by the explosive growth of information technologies, the transformation of images into commodities, the emergence of increasingly diverse communities, the fragmentation of personal selves, and the crumbling of previously dominant outlooks, such as beliefs in progress or absolute truth. Also, many of our interactions are becoming characterized by a profound change in their temporal rhythms, marked by an increasing emphasis on speed and efficiency. In a related vein, a growing number of our interactions are electronically mediated, taking place through cell phones, computers, and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, You Tube, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Reddit, Flickr, and Vine, to name only a few.

Because of the convenience of electronic communications and the growth of social networking platforms, social life in Western societies has become much less dependent on face-to-face interactions. In many respects, those of us who live in the West find ourselves immersed in a hypermodern “cyberculture”—a culture that emphasizes rapid communication, fluid identities, computer-mediated interactions, and virtual social networks. Indeed, our lives and identities have become marked by how “connected” we are to others in cyberworlds as well as to people in non-virtual spaces. As a result of the growing impact of computers, cell phones, and electronically mediated interactions, we have learned to regard virtual connections as a necessity of everyday life and, in some cases, as a key ingredient of happiness.

Overall, the selections in Part I offer conceptual pillars and analytic insights that securely support sociological psychology and microsociology. They also remind us that more popular ways of thinking about human beings and social reality may not do justice to their fascinating complexity, particularly given the rapidly changing nature of contemporary social

#### Note

1. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). For a related discussion of the value of “sociological mindfulness,” see Michael Schwalbe, *The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation*, 3rd ed. (McGraw-Hill, 2005).



## Together We Construct Our Worlds

KENNETH GERGEN

*Most people today are at least vaguely aware of the wide variety of human cultures or ways of life that populate the globe. Although they may consider their own way of life superior to others, they recognize that other people hold radically different beliefs and observe wildly different customs than they do. It is as if such people live in a completely different world, and, in an important sense, this is true. Humans at all times and in all places do not experience the same reality. Rather, they experience a socially constructed reality that their predecessors have bequeathed to them and that they reproduce in their everyday actions and interactions. In this selection, Kenneth Gergen explains how and why people construct their own reality and how that reality is grounded in language, conversation, and shared meanings.*

*In addressing these themes, Gergen highlights the key features of a social constructionist perspective, which recognizes that people's biological constitution does not adequately order their relationship to the environment. Instead, people must interpret, define, and endow their environment with meanings to respond to it effectively. Human meanings provide the regulation and order to human conduct that biology does not. However, individual humans construct these meanings together rather than alone. They endow their environment with shared meanings that promote the coordination of action. Moreover, because those*

*meanings are shared or intersubjective, they assume an objective status—that is, they exist apart from any particular individual's experience.*

*The seeming objectivity of social constructed realities is further enhanced by the fact that infants are born into a world already interpreted and organized by others. The significant others who care for an infant transmit their culture's prevailing definitions of reality to him or her. To the naïve child, the construction of reality is simply given and inevitable. In addition, the significant others who care for infants and children also transmit messages to them concerning their socially defined identities. They might name and respond to a child in ways that indicate she is a girl, an African American, pretty, a tomboy, and the like. Eventually, the child comes to define herself similarly and acquires a self, a process that will be discussed in far more detail later in this volume.*

*As sociologists emphasize, the term "socialization" is commonly used to refer to this process whereby children are inducted into a society and its shared conceptions of reality. One goal of socialization is to establish a correspondence between that shared view of reality and the individual's own subjective experience. This is initially accomplished during primary or childhood socialization by the seeming inevitability of the significant others' definitions of reality. These definitions provide the child with his or her most basic*

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nostic structure, or ways of meaningfully ordering experience. Subsequent or secondary socialization into particular roles builds on this primary reality.

Yet correspondence between socially shared or objective reality and subjective experience is never established once and for all. It must be constantly confirmed and maintained. As Gergen argues, the most important means of reality maintenance is conversation. Conversation with others continually reaffirms social definitions of reality, not only by what is said but also by what is taken for granted and underserving of comment. Conversation also maintains the shared reality through the language and "language games" in which it is conducted. Language classifies, typifies, and defines experience. Because it is shared, it gives the reality it constructs the accents of objectivity and inevitability.

Gergen illustrates how a social constructionist perspective enables us to see how our society's definitions of reality are neither objective nor inevitable. They do not simply reflect "the world as it is." Instead, they represent the understandings of a particular cultural tradition rooted in a specific time and place. As a result, the conceptions of reality we share with others in our society are partial and selective in nature. They do not offer us a complete or unbiased understanding of the world. As Gergen emphasizes, a social constructionist perspective can help us to recognize that other ways of understanding the world exist or can be created. This recognition offers us an important measure of freedom. We can embrace or construct new and different ways of seeing the world and ourselves. As we hear new voices, learn about different cultures and perspectives, question taken-for-granted assumptions, and consider alternative ways of being, we can "cross the threshold into new worlds of meaning" and action. We can also acquire a deeper understanding of who we are, how we developed into that person, how we might change in the future, and how we can better respond to the social and historical forces that are shaping our identities, interactions, and everyday lives.

It was hilarious. We were showing our grandson, Sean, photographs from the "old days," those old black and white Kodak prints of grandparents,

early motor cars, vintage clothing and the like. A good thing, we felt, that this little four-year-old learns about his ancestors. When the photo show was over, Sean looked up slowly and thoughtfully asked, "In the old days was everything in black and white?" We roared with laughter. . . . Only later did we think of the deeper implications. Consider:

- We usually assume that photographs tell us the truth about their object. Sean did exactly this, and we laughed.
- If a black and white photo was used as evidence in a trial, we would say that it tells us the truth. So, whether a photo tells the truth seems to be a matter of social convention. To further illustrate [how the truth of a photo depends on social agreement, think about how you react] when a friend shows you a photo of yourself; the friend loves it, but you feel, "ugh, that's not how I look."

You may want to stop the show at this moment to tell me that Sean was just wrong in assuming that the photo was true. "After all, the world is in color!" But is it? Stroll in the forest at midnight, and what colors do you see? Ask experimental psychologists if the world is colored. They will tell us that our experience of color results from light reflected on the retina. For them, colored photos don't tell the truth about nature.

So, here we have an interesting premise: *whether a photo tells the truth about the world is a matter of social agreement*. If this seems reasonable, let's take another step: what about our verbal descriptions of the world? After all, we use words to describe the world just as we use photos? We even argue that photos are more accurate than words in revealing the truth. But can words tell us the truth regardless of social agreement.

This is not a trivial matter. Isn't the aim of science to tell the truth about the world? Don't jury trials seek to determine guilt or innocence on the basis of the facts? Don't we trust certain newspapers to tell us "what's really going on?" We institutionalize people because they are "out of touch with reality." Is



truth in all these cases just a matter of social agreement? These can be issues of life and death.

Let's press the case: Consider your name . . . Erik, Carol, Juan. . . . Your friends and family all use such names to talk about you. "Juan is away at college," "Carol has a job now," "Erik is ill." All these statements are treated as if they are true or false. At the same time, the names were chosen; you could have been given many other names. So, whether "Juan is away at college," depends on whether we agree with your parents to call you Juan. It also follows that whether you are "away at college" depends on what we are willing to call "away" and "college." Does "away" mean two miles or two thousand? So, the truth of such statements depends on our agreements about how to use language.

. . . [W]hat you have here is an opening glimpse into the drama called *social construction*. The basic proposal is simple and straightforward: *what we take to be the truth about the world importantly depends on the social relationships of which we are a part*. But that is only the beginning. When you enter the logics of social construction, your world will begin to change. You will begin to question such long honored words as "reality," "objectivity," "reason," and "knowledge." Your understanding of yourself—your thoughts, emotions, and desires—will also be transformed. Your relations with others will come to have an entirely new meaning. You will see world conflict in a different light, and begin to create new ways of going on—not only in your personal life, but also in professions of research, education, therapy, health care, management, and more.

As one student put it, "Once you get into constructionist ideas, all the furniture starts flying out the window." And, because of their energizing power, you will find constructionist ideas and practices are now explored in all corners of the world. You may travel from Buenos Aires to Helsinki, from London to Hong Kong, from New Delhi to Moscow and find lively discussions of these issues. As many believe, these ideas may be vital to the world's future. If we understand that our claims to what is real, true, or moral are human

constructions, then we might be more tolerant and curious about those from whom we differ. To be sure, there is controversy; with change there is inevitably resistance. You may also find yourself resisting. All the better! This should sharpen the edge of your reading.

The ideas generally called social constructionist do not belong to any one individual. There is no single book or school of philosophy that defines social construction. Rather, social constructionist ideas emerge from a process of dialogue, a dialogue that is ongoing, and to which anyone—even you as reader—may contribute. As a result, however, there is no one, authoritative account that represents all the participants. There are many different views, and some tensions among them. . . . I will outline a number of major proposals shared by many [constructionist thinkers]. . . .

### Together We Construct Our Worlds

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say?

Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*

As I mentioned, the basic constructionist idea is simple enough. But with the next step you can begin to appreciate the fuller drama. Let's take the world of common-sense knowledge. What is more obvious than the fact that the world is simply out there for us to observe and understand? There are trees, buildings, automobiles, women, men, dogs and cats, and so on. If we observe the world for what it is, we can learn how to save the forests, build strong buildings, improve the health of children, and so on. Such an orientation is often called *realism*. Now, let's stand these trusted assumptions on their head.

What if I proposed that there are no trees, buildings, women, men, and so on until you and I agree that there are? "Absurd," you may say, "Just look around you; the trees were here long before we came along." That sounds reasonable, but let's



take little Julie, a one-year-old, in her stroller. Her gaze seems to move past trees, buildings and cars without notice; she does not seem to distinguish men from women. William James, a trailblazer in psychology, once said that the world of a child is a "booming, buzzing confusion." Whether you agree with him or not, Julie's world doesn't seem to be the kind we live in as adults. Unlike Julie, we see that these are pine trees, we see an advertisement for a TV show on the passing bus, and notice the police [officer] on the corner. In Julie's world there are no men and women, no budding trees, no advertisements, and no police. What reaches our eyeballs may not be different from Julie's, but what this world *means to us* is different. In this sense, we approach the world in a different way. This difference is rooted in our social relationships. It is within these relationships that we construct the world in this way or that. Through participation in relationships, *the world comes to be what it is for us*. And, as Julie grows up, she will come to construct the world in much the same way we do.

#### Different Yous from Different Views

*Who are you, really? Consider the possibilities.*

To the:	You are:
Biologist	"a mammal"
Hairdresser	"needing a cut"
Teacher	"college material"
Gay man	"possibly straight"
Christian	"a sinner"
Parent	"surprisingly successful"
Artist	"an excellent model"
Psychologist	"slightly neurotic"
Physicist	"an atomic composition"
Banker	"a future customer"
Doctor	"a hypochondriac"
Hindu	"in an imperfect state of Atman"
Lover	"a wonderful person"
Ifalukian	"filled with liget"

And if you were to describe yourself, whose terms would you use? From what traditions would they borrow? If you chose to create your own language, who would understand you?

Now let's rephrase the basic constructionist idea and consider the consequences: If everything we consider real is socially constructed, then *nothing* is real unless people agree that it is. You may now be skeptical. Does this mean that death is not real, or the body, or the sun, or this chair on which I am seated . . . and the list goes on. It is important to be clear on this point. Social constructionists do not say, "There is nothing," or "There is no reality." The important point is that whenever people define reality—that death is real, or the body, the sun, and the chair on which they are sitting—they are speaking from a particular standpoint or tradition of understanding. To be sure, *there is something* that happens, but when you try to describe that *something*, you will inevitably rely on some tradition of sense making.

To illustrate, if a friend tells you, "My grandfather is dead," he or she is usually speaking from a biological standpoint. The event is defined as the termination of certain bodily functioning. From other traditions we might also say, "He has gone to heaven," "He will live forever in my heart," "This is the beginning of a new cycle of his reincarnation," "His burden has been eased," "He lives in his legacy of good works," "In his three children, his life goes on," or "The atomic composition of this object has changed." These descriptions are quite different, but within their own traditions, each is a legitimate alternative to biological view. And, for little Julie, the event in question might indeed be unremarkable. In her world "grandfather's death" doesn't exist as an event. For the constructionist, it is not that, "There is nothing," but "*nothing for us*." In other words, it is from our relationships with others that the world becomes filled with what we take to be "death," "the sun," "chairs," and so on.

In a broader sense, we may say that as we communicate with each other we construct the world in which we live. In one conversation, for example, we will find much to complain about. There are the daily pressures, the lack of money, the lack of opportunity, and so on. In other conversations we will find ourselves excited, enthusiastic, and



hopeful. The world itself is neither filled with problems nor interesting and exciting events. "Problems" don't exist in the world as independent facts; rather we construct worlds of good and bad, and define anything standing in the way of achieving what we value as "a problem." If the conversation could be changed, all that we construct as "problems" could be reconstructed as "opportunities." In effect, to choose a relationship is to choose a world and how you live in it. . . .

It is at this point that you can begin to appreciate the enormous potential of constructionist ideas. For the constructionist, our actions are not constrained by anything traditionally accepted as true, rational, or right. Standing before us is a vast spectrum of possibility, an endless invitation to innovation. This is not to say that we must abandon all that we take to be real and good. Not at all. But it is to say that we are not [simply] bound by the chains of either history or tradition. As we speak together, listen to new voices, raise questions, ponder alternatives, and play at the edges of common sense, we cross the threshold into new worlds of meaning. The future is ours—together—to create.

### The Social Origins of the Good and the Real

With this fundamental vision at hand, we can now explore more deeply some of the central assumptions at play. . . . [These assumptions are:]

#### 1. *The ways in which we understand the world is not required by "what there is."*

You might readily agree there is nothing about your particular body that required your receiving the name you live by. If your name is James, you could have been named Jordan, Julia or Jerome. In effect, you owe your name to others. It is a matter of social convention. But now expand the implications: Given whatever exists, we may say that there is no arrangement of syllables, words or phrases that must be used to describe or explain it. For any state of affairs, a potentially unlimited number of descriptions and explanations should be possible. If

this is so, then it also follows that everything we have learned about our world and ourselves—that gravity holds us to the earth, people and birds both fly, cancer kills, or the earth revolves around the sun—could be otherwise. There is nothing about "what there is" that demands these particular accounts; we could use our language to construct alternative worlds in which there is no gravity or cancer, or in which persons and birds are equivalent, and the sun revolves around the world. For many people this supposition is deeply threatening. Not only does it suggest that there is no truth—words that truly map the world. It also suggests there is nothing we can hold onto, nothing solid on which we can rest our beliefs, nothing secure. Isn't this nihilistic?

Perhaps this state of insecurity is not as bad as it might appear. In daily life, many of our categories lead to untold suffering. Consider the distress and death that have resulted from such phrases as:

"This is mine."

"He is to blame."

"She didn't pass the test."

"The intelligence scores of this group are superior to that group."

"The fertilized egg is a human being."

"There is only one God."

"We are the master race."

From the constructionist standpoint none of these phrases is demanded by "the way things are." Other ways of talking are possible, and with far more promising outcomes. This is not to abandon our various traditions of truth, but simply to see them as optional. We have choices. . . .

#### 2. *The ways in which we describe and explain the world are the outcomes of relationship.*

The meaning of a word is its use in the language.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Let's return to [one-year-old] Julie for a moment. As she develops she will begin to describe the world in terms of "pine trees" and be able to tell us that



there will be a "police [officer]" and an "advertisement" on a "bus." It is also clear that Julie learned how to use these words in her relations with others. In effect, *she had to have the relations before she could describe the world in a way we would call accurate*. I bring this last sentence to attention because it flies in the face in the longstanding view that language can provide an accurate *picture of the world*. According to this picture metaphor, some descriptions provide a more accurate picture of events than others. You might agree that "I am reading a book" at this moment is a better picture of what you are doing than saying you are "riding an elephant." But you didn't get the phrase "reading a book" by simply observing; you acquired it from other people. And most importantly, you also learned when to apply it. So, it's *only by social agreement that the picture theory works*. . . .

Most important here is the work of the twentieth-century philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his pivotal writing, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein replaces the *picture metaphor* of language with that of *the game*. Words acquire their meaning, proposes Wittgenstein, through how they are used in what he called *language games*. If I say "good morning" to you, chances are that you will reply with something equivalent (for example, "good morning to you, too" or "hi, how are you?"). Let's call this a greetings game. We both know what kinds of words to say on those occasions, what you say and what I say in return. It's much like tennis, where you hit the ball and I try to hit it back to you. The meaning of our words, however, is wholly dependent on their use in the game. You can't say "good morning" at just any time you wish—without your sanity being questioned. Walking about and saying good morning to all the parking meters might possibly land you in the doctor's office. But, in the game of a greeting, "good morning" is perfectly understandable. Words, then, gain their meaning through the tradition of the game. In the game of baseball, "home run" is an important term. In the same way, "atoms" feature importantly in the game of physics, and "economic class" in the game

of sociology. Words can function like pictures, but only within a game.

### 3. Constructions gain their significance from their social utility.

As the game metaphor suggests, as we relate together we come to develop reasonably reliable patterns of coordination. These patterns have a rule-like character; they follow a rough set of conventions about what is acceptable and what is not. It is not that our relationships *are* games; rather, they are similar in that together we have created a way of going on together. Importantly, however, these ways of going on together not only include our words and actions, but also the various objects, spaces, and environments around us. Thus, for example, the language game we use in tennis—including such words as "serve," "deuce," and "thirty love") is related not only to the movements of the players, but to the fact that they have racquets, balls, a tennis court, and available light. Wittgenstein called the entire array of relationships—words, actions, objects—a *form of life*. What we do in a classroom together is thus a form of life, as is a dinner party, or having a romance.

Understanding that our linguistic constructions are embedded in forms of life is very helpful. At the outset, we can appreciate why the terms in which we construct the world come into being. Why, for example, do Inuits have more words for snow than people who live in warmer climes? It is because these distinctions are useful for those who live in the arctic. They can adjust their behavior more carefully to the surrounding conditions; the distinctions could even be lifesaving. For the most part, world construction and social utility are closely allied.

The phrase	is useful when you are:
"Today's specials . . ."	eating at a restaurant
"Strike three"	playing baseball
"I want a trim"	at the hairdressers
"I need two tickets"	going to the movies
"atomic accelerator"	smashing atoms



... When we say that a certain description [of reality] is "accurate" (as opposed to "inaccurate") or "true" (as opposed to "false") we are not judging it according to how well it pictures the world. Rather, we are saying that the words have come to function as "truth telling" within the rules of a particular game—or more generally, according to certain conventions of certain groups. In the game of soccer, we talk about "penalty kicks," and there is no question about when a penalty kick is occurring. The term is very useful to carry out the game in a fair manner, and it can be used with complete accuracy within the conventions of the game. In the same way, the proposition that "the world is round and not flat" is neither true nor false in terms of pictorial value, that is, correspondence with "what there is." However, by current standards, it is more acceptable to play the game of "roundworld-truth" when flying from Kansas to Cologne; and more useful to "play it flat" when touring the state of Kansas itself. ...

In this context we can come to see why the term "truth" is both essential to our lives, but potentially dangerous. It is useful within any given form of life [or group culture], because it affirms that something is the case according to the rules or conventions of the participants. It helps the participants coordinate their actions in ways that are valuable to them. In this way, to say, "it is true that ..." is an invitation to others to place their trust in you. Thus, if a biochemist reports the results of an experiment on amino acids, he or she is contributing to what biochemists take to be the truth of the world—according to the rules of biochemistry. And, the researcher presumes that other biochemists will trust the results. If they repeat the experiment, they will find the same results. Within a given tradition, the word "truth" is most valuable. However, *when "the truth" leaps from its location within a specific tradition we confront the possibilities for suppression, conflict, and oppression.* ... In the name of universal truth, the world has witnessed torture, murder, and genocide. Let us abandon the idea of *Truth* (universal, for all people at all times), and replace it

with multiple truths, useful ways of communicating for various people at various times.

#### 4. *Values are created and sustained within forms of life—including science.*

As we relate together, develop languages, and trusted patterns of living so do we develop values. Most of these values are implicit; they are simply present in "our way of doing things." If a classmate suddenly rose from his seat during a lecture, and screamed at the lecturer, "Go to hell!," you would be astounded, and probably consider this a rude intrusion. There are no written rules that condemn such behavior, but with each lecture we attend we pay homage to the unwritten rule of polite listening. This line of reasoning is straightforward enough. The drama begins when we apply it to statements of objective fact—that is, supposedly neutral or value-free accounts. For example, we like to think that some news reports are more objective than others, and we prefer those we can rely on. But, what if I were a correspondent trying to report as objectively and accurately as possible about what is taking place in Afghanistan? I can describe the figures lying on the road before me as "five casualties" or as "promising young men whose bodies have been ripped apart by an explosion." Neither of these descriptions is inaccurate by common standards. However, the value propositions are dramatically different. In effect, when you hear or read a news report, you are not receiving a value-neutral, "just the news" description of what is taking place. You are absorbing a world of values. If you do not recognize the implicit values, it is because you and the reporter typically share the same values.

... [W]hat we take to be knowledge does not begin with the lone individual observing the world for what it is. Rather, as we confront the world, our descriptions and explanations emerge from our existence in relationships. It is out of relationships that we foster our vocabularies, assumptions, and theories about the nature of the world (including ourselves), and the way we go about studying



or carrying out research. These relationships also favor certain values, either explicit or implicit. What we take to be knowledge of the world will always carry the values of those traditions that fashion our inquiry and our conclusions.

... For constructionists, [recognizing that truth and knowledge are linked to group values and perspectives] leads to a celebration of *critical reflexivity*; that is, the attempt to place one's premises into question, to suspend the "obvious," to listen to alternative framings of reality, and to grapple with the comparative outcomes of multiple standpoints. For the constructionist this means an unrelenting concern with the blinding potential of the "taken-for-granted." If we are to build together toward a more viable future then we must be prepared to doubt everything we have accepted as real, true, right, necessary or essential. This kind of critical reflection is not necessarily a prelude to rejecting our major traditions. It is simply to recognize them as traditions—historically and culturally situated; it is to recognize the legitimacy of other traditions within their own terms. And it is to invite the kind of dialogue that might lead to common ground.<sup>1</sup>

#### Note

1. The last paragraph in this selection is taken from Kenneth Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction* (London: Sage Publications). 2nd ed., p. 13.

#### Reflective Questions

1. According to Gergen, what is the most basic idea of the social constructionist perspective? What are

the consequences of this idea? Why does Gergen regard this idea as exciting and liberating? How does he think it can be helpful to you?

2. Do you accept Gergen's assertion that "nothing is real unless people agree that it is"? Why do you accept or reject this claim? Do any realities transcend human agreement? What are those realities, and do they affect people even if they aren't recognized as real?
3. What role does conversation play in the creation and maintenance of social reality? Why is conversation so important? How does it influence your understandings of yourself? How does it influence your perceptions of others and the world around you?
4. What is a "language game"? What language games do you engage in at work and in the classroom? What language games do you engage in with your friends when you go to a party, club, or social event?
5. Many women consider hot flashes to be a normal and bothersome experience during menopause. But not all women in all places experience hot flashes in the same way. In the United States, women who are white, educated, and affluent are more likely to experience hot flashes than other women. People in sub-Saharan Africa view menopause as a positive life transformation for women. The Japanese had no word for "hot flashes" or menopause until Western pharmaceutical companies began advertising hormone replacement therapy in 1995. How can there be this much variation in how women experience menopause? Isn't menopause a biological reality? If not, what is it? Where do symptoms come from? Does this mean that women's menopausal symptoms are somehow not real or should not be treated? How is menopause a blend of biological and social realities?



## Human Neural Plasticity and Socialization

GERALD HANDEL, SPENCER CAHILL, AND FREDERICK ELKIN

*There is a long-standing debate regarding whether biological factors or experience are largely responsible for the course of human development and individuals' consequent abilities and characteristics. Some argue that almost all human characteristics are products of genetic inheritance. Others argue that humans are almost totally products of their experience. This debate is often called the "nature versus nurture" controversy, as if human biology and experience were easily separable. Although there are those who still promote biological determinism and wholly environmental positions, there is a growing recognition among both biological and social scientists that most human characteristics result from complex interactions between biological processes and experience. Probably the most telling research in this regard is that on human neural plasticity or the responsiveness and adaptability of the human brain to experience.*

*This selection summarizes some of the research findings regarding human neural plasticity and the interplay between neurology and socialization in human development. Consistent with the earlier selection by Kenneth Gergen, it cites research evidence that human infants have a "predisposition toward sociality." The authors of this selection observe that this innate responsiveness to other humans initiates a complex interplay between biological processes and social experience that is the essence of human socialization and development.*

*A particularly important consequence of this complex interplay is the shaping of the functional circuitry of the brain, patterns of brain activity involved in the acquisition and retention of different skills and abilities, in the triggering of emotional reactions, the processing of sensory input, and the regulation of bodily movement. This circuitry forms through the development of synapses, or connections between nerve cells or neurons, and patterns of synaptic activity. As this selection notes, most synaptic connections in humans develop after birth and are subject to experiential influences. Millions of new synapses form in the brain of a human infant every day. Those that are stimulated by environmental inputs are strengthened, while those that are not are gradually weakened and eventually "pruned" or eliminated. Experience thereby shapes the functioning circuitry of the human brain and the skills and abilities the individual acquires, his or her emotional reactions, perceptions, and physical capabilities.*

*Language learning provides one important example. As this selection notes, human children seem "primed" to learn and understand spoken language, and do so quite rapidly when exposed to a language. However, the realization of that remarkable capacity depends on exposure to a language or languages, to experience. Moreover, the mastering of a particular language seems to interfere with the later learning of a second language. As this selection notes, there*

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is even evidence that quite early in life children lose their ability to recognize different phonemes or vocal sounds that their native or original language does not distinguish. Children can learn to speak a second or even third language proficiently and virtually accent free, but that capacity declines with age, apparently because the neural circuitry of the brain becomes less flexible as it is continually reactivated by repeated experience.

Although human neural plasticity declines with age and the corresponding accumulation of experience, it never disappears. This selection is limited to the importance of neural plasticity during primary or childhood socialization. However, according to one of the leading experts on human neural plasticity, research indicates "that there is considerable residual malleability of the brain" among adults (Huttenlocher 2002, 188). And, it is because of such human neural plasticity that humans require nurture or social experience to complete their nature. In an important sense, as Kenneth Gergen noted in an earlier selection, humans construct their own nature.

Until recently, social scientists could only point to the wide variability among human societies as evidence of the biological plasticity of the human organism. However, recent discoveries of neurological research provide more direct evidence of humans' remarkable degree of *neural plasticity* (Huttenlocher 2002). These research findings suggest that the biological development, structure, and functioning of the human brain is "largely environmentally regulated" (Huttenlocher 2002, 189).

The development of the brain does occur within what many neurologists call "a particular genetic envelope" (Johnson 1997, 182). For example, all of the neurons or nerve cells that will make up the human brain have been produced and most moved or migrated into what will be their permanent location in the brain halfway through gestation or fetal development. However, "the real business of brain development is in synapse formation" or *synaptogenesis* (Elliot 1999, 26). A synapse is a junction

that links one neuron to another. Once neurons are in their permanent location they sprout branches called *dendrites* and a kind of trunk called an *axon*. Everyplace where a dendrite comes close to an axon there is a potential for synapse formation. If stimulated, the axon releases a "chemical messenger" or neurotransmitter that may then "bind" to a receptor chemical of a nearby dendrite of another neuron, forming a synapse (Elliot 1999, 23). This is the means through which neurons "communicate" or transfer information, leading to the coordinated functioning of systems of neurons (Barnet and Barnet 1998, 17). The development of such functioning neural systems apparently underlies the acquisition and retention of varied skills and abilities. In humans some synapses are formed before birth, but over eighty percent of the growth of dendrites and consequent formation of synapses occurs after birth when neurons are subject to the influence of sensory stimulation or experience (Elliot 1999, 27). Genes may lay the foundation for the functioning human brain, but experience largely determines what is built upon that foundation.

Most of the regulation of human intellect, emotions, as well as sensory and motor processes in humans takes place in the cerebral cortex or outer layer of the brain. Yet, at birth, there are few synaptic connections in that "rumpled gray mantle that covers the brain" (Barnet and Barnet 1998, 17). Most synaptic connections there form during the first year of life when the size of the brain rapidly expands to near-adult size (Huttenlocher 2002, 41), and an estimated 1.8 million new synapses form each second (Elliot 1999, 27). However, these synapses are not "hard-wired." Those that are routinely stimulated and activated are stabilized or strengthened while less active ones are weakened (Elliot 1999, 30). Hence, the initial burst of synaptic formation over the first one or two years of life is followed by "a much longer period of elimination or pruning of . . . synaptic connections."

It is generally believed that this early "overproduction" and subsequent pruning of synaptic connections accounts for humans' remarkable



neural plasticity and capacity to learn. For example, the brains of human infants and young children have a remarkable capacity for functional self-repair. In an infant or young child with localized brain damage from stroke or injury, the undamaged parts of the cerebral cortex commonly “take over” functions normally carried out by the damaged region (Huttenlocher 2002, 2). For example, language processing is normally localized in certain regions of the left side or hemisphere of the brain. However, language processing is often taken over by the right hemisphere if those regions of the left hemisphere are damaged or removed for medical reasons at a young age (Huttenlocher 2002, 136). Hence, individuals with such early brain damage can become as proficient in language use as those whose brains are fully intact, although there are limits to such neural plasticity. Extensive brain injury or damage can result in the crowding of neurological functions into smaller than normal areas of the brain resulting in impairment of those functions and the associated abilities. Yet, the human brain has a remarkable capacity to “rewire” itself, especially early in life, and commonly does so in response to environmental inputs, especially those from the social environment.

Varied research suggests that human infants seem biologically “primed” to attend to other people. For example, research shows that within two to four months of birth infants tend to look significantly more at a schematic drawing of a human face than at either an empty circle or a circle containing scrambled facial features (Johnson 1997, 99–117). Two month old infants also “show signs of becoming attuned to the eyes as a privileged communicative feature” (Rochart 2001, 138), and by six months of age they smile significantly more at an adult who looks directly at them compared to one who slightly averts her or his gaze (Hains and Muir 1996). Similarly, infants seem inherently responsive to human facial expressions of emotions. For example, in one study, newborns were observed while facing an experimenter who displayed, in succession, exaggerated expressions of happiness,

sadness, and surprise. The newborns tended to widen their lips in response to the display of happiness, to protrude their lower lips during the expression of sadness, and to increase the opening of their eyes and mouth when the experimenter looked surprised (Feld et al. 1982). Such seemingly innate responsiveness to human stimulation arguably invites human interaction and thereby helps initiate the complex interplay of biological processes and social experience involved in human socialization.

Unfortunately, not all human newborns seem biologically primed to encourage social interaction and, thereby, their own socialization. For example, research suggests that some newborns who are later diagnosed with infantile autism tend to find novel forms of stimulation, including human stimulation, aversive that other newborns find pleasurable. That may be why autistic children tend to withdraw into so-called stereotypic forms of self-stimulation such as repeatedly rocking back and forth, flipping a light switch, or persistently rubbing a piece of carpet. However, the developmental psychologist Stanley Greenspan (1997, 159) and his colleagues have dramatically illustrated that autistic children’s apparent aversion to human stimulation need not be an insurmountable barrier to adequate socialization. In their therapy with autistic children, Greenspan and his colleagues treat these children’s stereotypic behavior not merely as symptoms but as opening wedges for human connection and, later, socialization. For example, they instructed the mother of a two-year-old girl who repeatedly rubbed a favorite piece of carpet to lie down on the floor and place her hand next to her daughter’s. The girl pushed her mother’s hand away, but each time she did so, her mother gently returned it. After three days, the girl began to smile at her mother when pushing her hand away and, from that small beginning, their play and interactions became progressively richer until, before long, the girl began to speak to her mother. At age seven, the girl had “a range of age-appropriate emotions, warm friendships and . . . score[d] in the low superior IQ range” (Greenspan 1997, 17). According to Greenspan (1997,



159), the crux to adequate socialization in such cases is finding the "environmental keys" that will unlock biological doors.

There are undoubtedly biological conditions that make socialization virtually impossible, but, because of human neural plasticity, they may be far fewer than previously thought. For example, a condition like, congenital deafness could prove a major barrier to socialization if we relied on verbal sounds and language to communicate with deaf children. Yet, nonverbal languages such as American Sign Language can easily overcome such a biological barrier to human interaction, communication, and, thereby, socialization. Such languages are environmental keys that unlock biological doors to adequate socialization. They can unlock those doors because of the remarkable neural plasticity of the human brain. For example, among humans who are born deaf, the processing of visual information "appears to expand into" regions of the brain usually used for "auditory functions" (Huttenlocher 2002, 101).

Like hearing children, children who are born or "congenitally" deaf seem biologically "primed" to acquire language. The most compelling evidence for humans' biological propensity for language is that children learn whatever language to which they are exposed, spoken or signed, without specific instruction, and in a remarkably regular way.

A baby goes from speaking no words at birth, to 50 to 100 words and two-word phrases at eighteen months or thereabouts, to nearly 600 words by age two and a half, to intricate and wordy constructions by three or four. A first-grader can understand 13,000 words and expertly deploys tenses, embedded clauses, compounds, and combinations using rules only a grammarian could explicate. (Barnet and Barnet 1998, 36)

Yet, the door to this remarkable human potential for language acquisition does not open automatically. It requires the environmental key of exposure to human language, and that exposure is always to a particular language or, in some cases, languages.

Although human infants apparently have the capacity to learn any human language, they end up proficiently speaking and understanding only the language or languages to which they are exposed relatively early in life. Research suggests that newborns can recognize differences between all the possible phonemes or distinctive vocal units of speech of all human languages. Yet, by the time they are around a year old, they have lost that ability and recognize only those sound combinations and contrasts that occur in the language to which they have been exposed or what is commonly called their "native language." For example, research indicates that Japanese babies can distinguish between the sounds "ra" and "la," but, a year later, they have lost this ability, apparently because these sounds are equivalent in Japanese (Barnet and Barnet 1998, 47).

Research findings such as these suggest that there may well be a critical or "sensitive" period for language learning. . . . That is, humans' capacity to acquire a language and speak it proficiently may decline with age. Grammatical aspects of language and proficient pronunciation may be most "sensitive" to the timing of language acquisition. For example, ninety percent of deaf children in the United States are born to hearing parents and differ greatly in the age at which they are first exposed to American Sign Language. As such, they provide important insights into the possible effects of learning a first language at varying ages (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000, 134). Much of the research on language acquisition in deaf children has focused on their use of grammar because it seems especially sensitive to early experience. Among fluent users of American Sign Language, "subtle differences in hand-shape, as well as the spatial location and movement of individual signs," denote similar logical relations as word endings and order, articles, prepositions, and pronouns in spoken languages (Elliot 1999, 361). However, research indicates that only "native signers" or children who are exposed to sign language within the first two or three years of life make full



use of these grammatical capabilities of American Sign Language. Those who learn American Sign Language when they are between four and six perform well but not as fluently as "native" signers, and those who do not learn American Sign Language until after they are twelve consistently sign in ungrammatical ways even after using it for thirty years or more (Elliot 1999, 362).

Studies of second language learning reveal similar patterns. The earlier in life individuals acquire a second language the more likely they are to speak it proficiently and accent free. For example, one study asked Chinese and Korean immigrants to the United States to listen to a few hundred English sentences, about half of which were ungrammatical, and indicate whether the sentences sounded "correct." "Only those who had immigrated by the age of seven performed as well as native English speakers, which is to say almost flawlessly." Among the rest, performance steadily declined in relation to the age at which they had immigrated and learned English (Elliot 1999, 362–363; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000, 134–135). Other research indicates that the ability to speak a second language accent free is also related to the age at which that second language is acquired. For similar languages, like English and German, this window of opportunity for accent free speech may extend into early adolescence but for dissimilar languages, like English and Korean, it may close much earlier (Huttenlocher 2002, 149).

Research on the timing of language acquisition and subsequent fluency in its use suggests a more general lesson about the interplay of nature and nurture in human socialization: There may be temporal or chronological constraints on the experientially shaped "circuitry" of the human brain. The countless synaptic connections and potential connections in young children's brains enable the formation of varied neural circuits and, hence, the learning of varied skills and information. Yet, the formation of neural circuits in response to environmental stimulation tends to localize different neural functions into specific areas of the brain, and the associated loss or

pruning of synaptic connections that are hot stimulated limits the subsequent plasticity of the brain. As the brain's neural circuitry becomes more organized and specialized, it becomes more inflexible. Consequently, skills and abilities that might be easily acquired at an earlier age may be quite difficult or even impossible to acquire at a later age.

However, if there are critical or "sensitive" periods for acquiring different skills and capabilities, it would be misleading to consider them solely a matter of biological maturation. Whatever children experience, synaptic connections are being activated, strengthened and stabilized while others are being weakened. The consequent neural circuitry of their brains are organized and specialized to process the kind of environmental stimulation to which they have been exposed. That circuitry may be ill-suited to process other kinds of environmental stimulation and interfere with the acquisition of new and different skills and abilities. For example, areas of the brain that normally process language may become devoted to other neural functions in children who are not exposed to human language earlier in their lives. If so, then their ability to process and proficiently use human language has not so much been lost as replaced by some other, experientially regulated neurological capability. Even the limits of our neural plasticity and capacity to learn are arguably products of the continual interplay of nature and nurture in our lives.

Moreover, the retention of acquired skills and capabilities also depends on this intricate dance between biology and experience in human life. Synaptic transmissions are facilitated by frequent activation, resulting in increased speed and accuracy in the performance of associated skills and abilities, while lack of activation can lead to the loss of neural pathways and the associated skills and abilities. For example, young children who learn to use a second language proficiently will rapidly lose that ability if they are not continually exposed to and use it. Experience not only shapes the neural circuitry of the human brain, it also sustains it. The biology of the brain organizes our experience, but experience just



as profoundly organizes the biology—the functioning neurological circuitry—of our brains.

This complex interplay of nature and nurture is likely implicated in humans' acquisition of not only socially shared characteristics, such as a particular language, but personal ones as well. For example, research indicates that infants tend to react with more or less inhibition when encountering novel situations such as a strange human or a mechanical toy that moves toward them (see Kagan 1994). These early differences in "temperament" are apparently inborn and may well be genetically determined. They also tend to be long-lasting. Relatively fearful infants tend to become timid children and shy adults, and relatively fearless infants tend to become bold children and outgoing adults. Yet, it is doubtful that the persistence of such traits is simply a matter of genetic inheritance.

... [S]ocialization is an interactive process of mutual influence. Infants' behaviors influence how parents and other caregivers respond to them, and those responses, in turn, influence infants. For example, parents are likely to expose babies to novel stimulation who seem to delight in it and to avoid irritating babies who find such stimulation upsetting. They consequently and quite inadvertently may perpetuate and even deepen infants' inherent boldness or timidity. On the other hand, research conducted by the child psychologist Jerome Kagan (1994) indicates that about a third of inhibited babies outgrow their timidity by kindergarten. He speculates that they do so because their parents made a conscious effort to "engineer emboldening experiences" by expressing interest in unfamiliar objects and new experiences and encouraging their child to do the same. Genes undoubtedly influence what human infants are and what they may become, but what humans most fundamentally are is biologically plastic or flexible.

Human biology, especially the neural plasticity of the human brain, provides the necessary foundation for human socialization. In turn, socialization shapes the very biological functioning of the human organism. In that sense, humans have not

a single but a dual nature. We are born with a biological nature that enables and even requires the acquisition of a second nature through nurture. ... As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973, 45) observes, humans "all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in the end having lived only one." Socialization largely determines the kind of life out of those thousand possibilities that we end up living.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What are the authors referring to when they use the term "neural plasticity"? What is a synapse?





How and why is synapse formation "the real business of brain development"? Are synapses "hard-wired" into our brains? What influences the development and elimination of our synapses?

2. How are children biologically "primed" to be attuned to others and to acquire language? What does research on children's learning of a second language reveal about the interplay of nature and nurture in the socialization process? How and why does aging affect the plasticity of the brain and our ability to learn new skills or abilities?

3. How would you use the information shared in this article to debate a friend who claims that "nature is more powerful than nurture" in shaping people's behaviors and personalities? How could you effectively argue that socialization largely determines the kind of lives we end up living?
4. Take time to watch a parent interacting with his or her baby. How does the baby's behavior influence his or her parent's responses? Based on your observations, would you agree with the authors' argument that socialization is "an interactive process of mutual influence"?





## Symbols and the Creation of Reality

KENT SANDSTROM

*Many thinkers who are influenced by evolutionary theory emphasize similarities between humans and other species. In recent years, a growing number of thinkers, including a few sociological psychologists, have argued that humans and their companion animals share a number of common features, including the ability to take the role of the other and to have preverbal experiences of selfhood. Yet, when we compare humans and other species, we cannot help but conclude that we are relatively unique within the animal kingdom. For good or ill, we brought heat to frigid climates, illuminated the darkness, erected huge and magnificent cities, and invented terrifying devices that could destroy them. The accomplishments of other animals do not even compare. In adapting to the environments that we inhabit, we have adapted those environments to our needs, desires, and dreams to an extent unparalleled by any other species. There is clearly something different about us.*

*In this selection, Kent Sandstrom contends that what makes us different from other creatures is our ability to make and use symbols. In highlighting this point, Sandstrom draws upon the sociological perspective known as symbolic interactionism, which serves as a foundation for many of the readings in this book. Guided by the insights of Herbert Blumer, the symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes that because we use and rely upon symbols, we do not respond to*

*stimuli in a direct or automatic way. Rather, through drawing on symbols we give meaning to stimuli and act toward them based on that meaning. For instance, if a person throws a ball in our direction, we will not know how to act until we interpret and give meaning to this stimulus. If we define it as a baseball pitch that we are supposed to hit, we will respond by swinging a bat at it. By contrast, if we define it as weapon that is designed to hurt us, we will probably respond by trying to avoid it. Most crucially, we will act toward the stimulus of the ball thrown toward us based on the meaning we give to it.*

*The symbolic interactionist perspective also stresses that the meanings we give to things derive from and arise out of social interaction. We learn the meaning of things, such as baseballs, books, cars, and beer, as we interact with others. In doing so, we rely heavily on symbols and language. Indeed, as Sandstrom illustrates in this selection, symbols organize our perceptions and shape our experiences of "reality." Symbols allow us to categorize and make sense of what is happening around and inside of us, particularly by enabling us to give names to the objects, events, people, and experiences we encounter. Through naming these things, we transform them into social objects, or objects that have shared meanings. These shared meanings, in turn, call out a common response in us. For instance, when we name something a*

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textbook, we give it the shared meaning of "something to read, reflect upon, and study." We thus know how to act toward it.

Above all, the symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes that our ability to use symbols allows us to transcend our immediate environments and to represent to ourselves and others things that are not otherwise available to our senses, such as feelings, ideas, and products of the imagination. Unlike other species, we humans are not confined simply to the world of perceptions and perceptual images. We also reside in a world of symbols, meanings, and values that we impose upon the perceptual world.

As Sandstrom implies, it is not the individual human being who creates these uniquely human environments. Symbols and their meanings must have a separate existence in order to have the same power over the individual's experiences as her or his perceptions. The only possible source of that separate existence is other humans. Symbols are necessarily shared. And, if what is uniquely human is uniquely social, then understanding human experience necessarily requires an understanding of social life.

All human behavior consists of, or is dependent upon, the use of symbols. Human behavior is symbolic behavior; symbolic behavior is human behavior. The symbol is the universe of humanity.

—Leslie A. White

Compared with other animals, we find ourselves in a unique situation as human beings. We do not live directly in a state of nature, nor do we see "reality" nakedly. As the philosopher Suzanne Langer (1948) observed, human perception consists of the continuous creation and re-creation of images and symbols. Our only means of taking in the world of objects and people around us is through continually re-creating them. In other words, we convert our experiences into images and symbols. Our brains do not simply record or relay what is going on "outside" or "inside" of us. Instead, when processing information or sensations, our brains act like giant, symbolic transformers,

changing virtually everything that passes through them into a stream of symbols.

According to Langer, this tendency for our brains to act like symbolic transformers is a crucial feature of our experience as human beings. It allows us to have a "constructive" rather than passive relationship to our environment. We do not simply react to things that exist in the world around us. Nor do we see these things "in the raw." Instead, we transform and interpret them through a symbolizing process. Thus, as we participate in the process of perception—the process of making sense of stimuli in our environment—we rely on our capacity to create and use symbols. Through this capacity we transform the stimuli that bombard us, such as a cluster of stars on a clear night, into a coherent and meaningful pattern—in this case, a pattern we call the Big Dipper.

### Sensation

Throughout our lives we are barraged by a flood of sensory experiences. We swim in a sea of sensation. Consider this very moment. Your attention is (I hope) focused on this chapter and the words you are reading in this sentence. But pause for a moment and think of all the other things you are experiencing. For instance, what else are you seeing besides this page and sentence? Are you seeing what's above, below, and to the sides of the page? Are you periodically glancing up to see what else is around you? Are you being affected by anything besides visual images? For instance, are you hearing any noises or smelling any odors? Do you feel any pressures on your body, such as the touch of your fingers on the book, your back on a chair, your elbows on a table, or your feet on the floor? After briefly paying attention to what's going on around you, you can recognize that you are being bombarded with stimuli.

If we remained at the level of sensation, we would soon be overwhelmed. Our world would lack continuity or coherence. Life would be a booming, buzzing confusion of lights, sounds, smells, colors, and movements. We would bounce



from one experience to another with little if any direction or purpose. We would not be able to organize our sensory experiences into broader patterns or configurations. Our perceptions, then, are not merely a matter of sensation; they also involve interpretation. Our senses provide us with the raw data to arrive at meaning.

As commonly recognized, we rely on five major senses as we interact with and gather information from our environment: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. When any of these senses are stimulated, as when the receptors in our ears respond to sound waves emitted by a roaring engine, they transmit a message to the brain, which processes this input. Each sense can be aroused by external stimuli, as when we are moved by a beautiful sunset, refreshed by a cool breeze or, less pleasantly, repulsed by the smell of manure. Our senses can also be aroused by stimuli that come from sources within us, as when we feel a pang of hunger, a flash of pain, or a surge of sexual desire.

Most important, we do not react passively to our environment. We actively seek out stimuli through our bodily senses. For instance, we move our head, eyes, hands, and body to explore the sensations of light, sound, and contact that surround us. In this process, we extract information about our sensations and select what is relevant. We turn toward or away from shades of light. We turn toward or away from various noises, such as a whispering voice or an exploding firecracker. We sniff for pleasant odors and hold our nose at unpleasant odors in the air around us. We feel physical objects, enjoying their texture, evaluating how we can use them, and gauging their potential dangers. Our senses, then, do not merely receive stimuli; they actively seek out stimuli until they achieve a clearer understanding of their nature.

### Conceptualization and Categorization

We understand our sensory experiences through grouping them into units, categories, or concepts, based on their similarities. We thereby engage in

the process of *conceptualization*. That is, we experience the world in terms of concepts—regularized ways of thinking about real or imagined objects and events. These concepts enable us to picture “things” in our world, to describe or represent these things to ourselves and one another, and to grasp their meaning. We use concepts because we are “cognitive misers” and we want to find relatively simple ways to deal with the stimuli picked up by our senses. By sorting these stimuli into related and manageable units and giving them labels, we recode their contents into summary categories—categories such as *red*, *tall*, *dark*, *beer*, *roommate*, *professor*, and *dorm room*. By using these and other categories, we simplify and generalize the world—we chunk and cluster its elements into meaningful concepts. For example, we look into the sky and register a collection of light waves striking our retinas as “blue”; we bite into a candy bar and interpret thousands of transmissions from our taste buds as “sweet”; we walk up to a person in a store and recode the range of sensations she emits into “friendly-looking clerk.” Through condensing and transforming our perceptions into these categories, we simplify the abundance of stimuli and information available to us. We organize our experiences.

At the same time, we bring order, continuity, and predictability into our perceptual world. Through plugging various stimuli into categories, we can link our present sensations to past sets of experience and perceptual organization. We can view an object or event as the same object or event despite the fact that it changes during each moment and from various perspectives. For example, we can recognize an event that shifts back and forth from one person lecturing to several people exchanging ideas as a “social psychology course.” We can also treat a number of objects that differ in a few ways, such as cars, vans, and trucks, as essentially similar “vehicles.” Through this ability to categorize objects, we can reduce the anxiety we would feel in an otherwise disordered and ambiguous world of stimuli.



Conceptualization allows us to sort and organize stimuli in a meaningful and orderly way. Through this process we actively attune ourselves to certain stimuli while ignoring others. We lump or group stimuli together and then respond to these groups as if they were objects. The key point is that we do not respond to the world “as it is.” It does not have an inherent meaning. Instead, as human beings we actively slice up the world and organize it into concepts—plants and animals, fruits and vegetables, cities and villages—that allow us to give it meaning and see it as orderly. Although this is an intricate process, it seems fairly simple because many of the concepts we rely on are supplied by the groups to which we belong. We learn these concepts as we learn the language and culture of our society (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1993).

### Symbols, Signs, and Meanings

Human experience takes on distinctive characteristics because people respond not only to signs but also to symbols. A sign is directly connected to an object or event and calls forth a fixed or habitual response. Its meaning is associated with its physical form and can be grasped through the senses. For instance, dark clouds are a sign of rain and smoke is a sign of fire. Both animals and people can make sense of and respond to these signs. Symbols, however, are a uniquely human phenomenon. Roughly speaking, symbols are something that people create and use to stand for something else. A powerful example is a flag. People use a colored rectangle of cloth to stand for a nation and its guiding principles. This cloth evokes passionate sentiments—pride, loyalty, patriotism, and, for some, disgust or animosity. Another example of a symbol is a hug. In our society a hug is widely regarded as a symbol of affection; thus, the willingness of one person to hug another is seen as an expression of his or her caring for that person. Among the various sets of symbols, the most important are linguistic symbols, those combinations of spoken sounds or written marks

that are used for all meanings. A symbol, then, is any object, gesture, or word that becomes an abstract representation of something else. Whatever it represents constitutes its meaning.

In most cases, the association between a symbol and the meanings it represents are arbitrary. The meanings designated by a symbol have no intrinsic relationship to the object it describes; the meanings are generally a matter of convention. Therefore, the meaning of a symbol cannot be discerned by examining the nature of the symbol itself. Think, for example, of the word *rose*. There is nothing inherent in this combination of four letters that would necessitate or even suggest it as a representation for a particular plant. The word has no color, smell, or thorns. Nor does it have anything in its spoken or printed form that would lead one to automatically think of the flower it describes. We conjure up an image of a velvety and sweet-smelling flower when hearing the word “rose” only because we have learned to make this association since childhood. We could just as easily have learned to call a rose “by any other name.” Of course, if we had been born in a non-English speaking country, such as Romania, a rose would not be a rose to us—it would be a *trandafir*.

### The Importance of Symbols

Our ability to use symbols has several important implications for our experience and activity. First, because symbols are abstractions, their use allows us to transcend our immediate environments and to have experiences that are not rooted in the here and now. We do not simply respond to the stimuli that arouse our senses in our current situation. We interpret these stimuli and respond to them in terms of our images of the past, present, and future, as well as our images of what is good, right, or important. In essence, we respond to stimuli of our own creation—that is, stimuli provided by the shadowy world of symbols. Thus we act within and toward a world that we have a major part in creating, a world that is inherently abstract rather than



concrete, a world of symbols that in some senses is imaginary (Hewitt 1994).

To understand this point, think of the abstract concepts that guide people's outlooks and actions, such as equality, justice, freedom, love, and honesty. At bottom, these are humanly created symbols. They do not exist "in nature" or have a material reality. But most of us tend to respond to them as if they are representations of essential truths about the world that should guide our actions.

Even in situations that have a physical character, such as sporting events, people are guided by and respond to symbolic realities. For example, athletes know that coaches stress the concepts of hustle, sportsmanship, and teamwork. These concepts are real only in terms of the representations that players and coaches make of them. Coaches presume that they can gauge "hustle" through observing the behavior and demeanor of their players. If a player displays a high level of effort, he or she is hustling. "Sportsmanship" is behavior that accords with certain moral standards of fair play and thoughtfulness. When a player behaves "properly" in an instance when improper behavior is possible, we have witnessed sportsmanship. If his or her team, having just lost a hard-fought game, graciously congratulates their opponents, they are seen as demonstrating sportsmanship. Likewise, "teamwork" is not the act of a single player but depends on the relationship among players. A single action doesn't demonstrate teamwork, but two or more coordinated actions (such as a throw, a catch, and a tag) do. Hustle, sportsmanship, and teamwork are not objective behaviors but rather depend on symbolic interpretations within the context of a sports event.

In addition to allowing us to transcend our immediate environment, symbols allow us to remember, imagine, plan, and have vicarious experiences (O'Brien 2005). Whenever we remember things, imagine things, or make plans to do things, we rely on and manipulate symbols. We also use symbols to have vicarious experiences. These experiences allow us to learn about the world and understand

others' experiences through observation; we do not have to experience everything ourselves in order to understand it. This ability is important not only for our individual and collective survival but also for another distinctive human characteristic: the transmission of culture.

Symbols provide the mechanism by which we create and acquire culture, or the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that characterize our society. Interactionists believe that it is through communication, or symbolic interaction, that we learn, create, and pass on culture. The boundaries of the spread of culture are linked to the boundaries of effective communication (Shibutani 1955). This point is important in that groups develop their own symbol systems, which come to exemplify how people are expected to think, feel, and behave. Every group develops its own idiosyncrasy (Fine 1987), or system of shared knowledge, beliefs, sentiments, and behaviors that serves as a frame of reference and basis of interaction for group members. Nicknames serve as a case in point. Often they characterize members of the group to each other and demonstrate that the individuals truly belong. Further, these nicknames are frequently connected to a particular group itself. In Gary Alan Fine's research on Little League baseball, many of the players had team nicknames that reflected their position on the team. One boy, for instance, was called "Maniac," both a linguistic play on his last name and an indicator that he often threw the ball wildly. The next year this same boy became the starting third baseman, his throwing skills improved, and his teammates started calling him "Main Eye."

Finally, the most crucial implication of symbols is that they provide us with templates for categorizing our experiences and placing them within a larger frame of reference. Without symbols, we cannot give meaningful form to what is happening around us, and our understandings of the world have a hit-or-miss quality. We combine and cluster symbols to form concepts that we use to sort our sensory experiences into orderly social categories. These categories often take the form of



*names*—names that have shared meanings for the members of a culture. Through using these names, we come to “know” the world around us.

### Naming “Reality” and Creating Meaningful Objects

As Anselm Strauss (1959) has observed, people act toward objects in light of the names they give to these objects. Naming is an integral part of human cognition. In naming an object, we classify and give meaning to it, thereby evaluating it and calling forth action toward it. The name organizes our perceptions and serves as a basis for our subsequent behavior; that is, it intervenes between the “stimulus” provided by the object and our “response” to it. In other words, we respond to the name that we give to the object and not to the essence of the object itself.

Take the example of a green,  $2\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  6" rectangular piece of paper with Andrew Jackson's picture on it. Call it “money” or, more specifically, a “twenty-dollar bill.” Based on this name, you immediately know how to act toward it. You know that you can use it at a store or business to purchase goods or services, such as groceries, clothing, or a haircut. And you know this because you have learned the meaning that the name “money” calls forth in our society. This meaning is not inherent to green,  $2\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  6" rectangular pieces of paper, as demonstrated by the fact that it is also granted to silver and copper circular-shaped pieces of metal. Instead, it emerges out of a shared agreement about what the objects we call “money” represent and how we should act toward them.

As another example of how we respond to things based on the names we give them, imagine a situation that involves you interacting with an unnamed person. It's late at night and you're walking across campus on your own. After you walk through a passageway between two buildings, you suddenly hear footsteps about 50 feet behind you. Feeling somewhat nervous, you glance backward and see a large male figure in the shadows. You pick up your

pace. The man behind you matches your speed and even starts to gain on you. You tentatively name (or categorize) this man as a potential “mugger” or “rapist,” and panic wells up within you. In turn, as he draws steadily closer to you, you prepare to run, yell, or defend yourself. Just as you're about to take defensive action, the man behind you calls out your name and says, “Hey, I've been trying to catch up with you since you walked between those buildings back there! I was going to yell ‘wait up’ but I wasn't sure it was you until now. Anyway, I was wondering if you'd like to walk back to the dorm together.” As you hear these words, you quickly recognize that it is one of your friends who has been walking behind you. In that moment he is transformed from “mugger” or “rapist” into “thoughtful friend.” Your response to him shifts accordingly. Your feelings of anxiety dissipate and you feel relaxed and reassured. You respond warmly rather than with a scream or a punch.

What these examples illustrate is that we formulate lines of action within and through the symbolic processes of naming and categorization. We use these processes to give meanings to things around us and to our actions as well as those of others. In other words, when we engage in the processes of naming and categorization, we transform things, events, and actions into *social objects*, or objects that have shared meaning. These objects call out a common mode of response in us.

According to interactionists, meaning is a socially created phenomenon. As such, it has three key features. First, it is extrinsic; that is, it is not a quality innate to particular objects. Instead, it is conferred on those objects “from the outside” based on how they are named and their intended use. Second, the meaning of objects is not fixed but varies with time, culture, situation, and the people acting toward them. For example, a bank is a different social object to student loan-seekers, to its managers and employees, and to potential bank robbers. Each acts differently toward the bank, and, consequently, to each it is a different object



with a different meaning. This point leads us to the third important feature of meaning: It emerges and gets transformed through our communication with others as we learn from them how to define the meaning of an object and as we offer our own meaningful view of that object. Think, for instance, of how we learn the meaning of an upright middle finger in the United States. We observe the anger or upset feelings that others convey when they raise this finger or have it displayed toward them. In turn, we quickly learn that raising one's middle finger toward others, or "flipping them off," is not a kind gesture nor is it meant to tell them to look up in the air. Instead, we learn that this is a lewd and hostile gesture that conveys feelings of anger and tells others that we wish them harm (ironically, through engaging in sexual activity). Most important, what this example demonstrates is that meaning emerges and becomes established through the process of social interaction. The establishment of meaning through this process is essential because human action requires symbolization. Without meaning, we do not know how to act toward the "things" around us—including others and ourselves. To name "things" is not only to know them but also to know how to *respond* to them. The names, or symbolic categories, we attribute to things represent knowledge, communication, and action (Strauss 1993).

### Language, Naming, and the Construction of Reality

Given the emphasis that interactionists place on symbols and the process of communication, they accord a special place to language. Language is the key medium through which people share meanings and construct "reality." It is a system of symbols that members of a culture use for representation and communication. Hence, language is the source of the symbols we use to give meanings to objects, events, or people and to convey these meanings to ourselves and others.

Language serves as the foundation for the development of the most important kind of symbols: words. Words have a unique and almost magical quality—they not only have meaning on their own but also when joined with others. In addition, words serve as the basis for other symbols. While people often use other modes of communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, and postures, these expressions become meaningful to us through words. For instance, in our culture a red light at an intersection means "Stop!"; a side-to-side turning of the head means "No!"; a waved hand toward an arriving friend means "Hi!"; and a police siren means "Pull over to the side of the road!"

Words facilitate our ability to communicate and share meanings. To understand this fact, try the following exercise. Approach several friends and tell them something about yourself without using any spoken or written words. Try to let them know what you are going to do this weekend. If this task seems too difficult, try letting them know what day it is. Obviously, without using words you face a challenging task. That is part of the amusement of the game of charades. Even if you are adept at using nonverbal gestures, you could probably communicate much more easily and accurately with your friends through relying on spoken or written words.

Overall, words are important because they offer shared names or categories through which we give meanings to our experiences and share these meanings. Words have their fullest impact and significance in relationship to other words within a language. As a part of the structure of language, words frame our conceptions and understandings of the world and guide our actions toward it.

Although words facilitate our ability to communicate and act, they do not necessarily make it *easy* for us to interact with others. The words we use are often ambiguous, and they may lead us to experience gaps or difficulties in our conversations with others. As an example, consider the



following exchanges between a mother and her teenage daughter:

DAUGHTER: Mom, can I take the car for a while to see my friends?

MOTHER: Okay, but don't be out too late—it's a school night and I need to use the car sometime to go to the grocery store.

DAUGHTER: Okay, that's no problem. I'll see you later. *The daughter returns four hours later, at 10:30 p.m.*

DAUGHTER: Hi, Mom, I just wanted to let you know I'm home and the car is back.

MOTHER: [Angrily] Where the heck have you been? I told you not to be out too late!

DAUGHTER: [Defensively] I wasn't out late—it's only 10:30! I don't go to bed until midnight!

MOTHER: But it's a school night; you should be in earlier than that!

DAUGHTER: Well, you didn't tell me a time. You just said that I shouldn't be out too late. 10:30 is not late!

MOTHER: Well, I did tell you that I needed the car sometime tonight to go grocery shopping.

DAUGHTER: Yeah, and I brought it back for you. You can go shopping now. The grocery store is open until midnight.

MOTHER: It's too late for me to go grocery shopping now! It's 10:30 and I'm tired.

DAUGHTER: Well, I don't see how that's my fault.

MOTHER: Oh, go to your room! I don't know why you can't listen to me better!

As this dialogue illustrates, the words we use do not always have a straightforward meaning; nor are they always interpreted in the way we intend them. Instead of leading to shared understanding and effective interaction, a number of the words we use, such as "a while," "later," and "sometime," have imprecise meanings and can lead to misinterpretations that result in frustrating or ineffective interaction. Thus, even when we use the same words as others, we do not necessarily "speak the same

language" (and interact smoothly with them), as most parents and teenagers can attest.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is perception? How is perception selective? For instance, how are our perceptions influenced and directed by social categories?
2. What is a symbol? What is the difference between a sign and a symbol? What makes symbols such an important aspect of human behavior and interaction?
3. What makes an object into a "social object?" How and why are the names we give to people or things important?
4. Analyze the speech of a local or national politician. What kind of language and symbols does he or she use when speaking? What does this language emphasize? What does it conceal? How does it frame the "issues" that the speaker addresses? Is language an important aspect of exercising power? How and why?



## The Rules of Denial

EVIATAR ZERUBAVEL

*In the previous selection, Kent Sandstrom highlighted how and why the names we give to things shape our perceptions and interpretations of them, thereby guiding our actions toward them. Sandstrom thus articulated a core premise of symbolic interactionism, the social psychological perspective that emphasizes how we depend on symbols and social meanings to make sense of the objects and realities we encounter. Symbolic interactionists stress that we act toward things based on the meanings we assign to them, and we learn what things mean through our social interactions.*

*When we are infants and we lack language skills, we are confronted with a dizzying array of unique objects and events. Our perceptions are a kaleidoscope of smells, sounds, sights, and tactile sensations. If we are to make sense of the world and order our relations to it, we must organize our perceptual experience. Regulating our responses to the environment requires that we regularize our experience. We do this by naming and classifying things, treating various objects and events as distinctly different. Categorizations and classifications are the basic building blocks we use for ordering our relations with the environment. They are the most fundamental means through which we define, interpret, and endow our world with meaning, thereby constructing its reality. Moreover, as the previous readings have suggested, we are born into a world already interpreted and organized by others.*

*We learn prevailing systems of classification and categorization through the socialization process and our ongoing interactions. We thereby come to define and experience the world in the same ways that other members of our society do.*

*In this selection, Eviatar Zerubavel illustrates how our socialization shapes our perceptions and interpretations of the objects and people we encounter. In doing so, he extends his earlier work in the area of cognitive sociology which highlighted how we, as human beings, sort our experience into distinct categories, or "islands of meaning." We lump together things we consider similar, ignoring their differences, and separate them from other things, ignoring similarities and exaggerating differences. The world we experience does not come prepackaged in such categories. We pack the world into them and, as Zerubavel points out, this process is an "inevitably arbitrary act." There are an infinite number of ways to break up reality into discrete categories, as demonstrated by the many cultural and historical variations in human classification systems.*

*Zerubavel emphasizes that language largely guides our classification of our experience. We learn a logic of classification when we learn a language and other symbol systems. In this way society teaches us how to perceive our world, order it into meaningful categories, and construct reality. This is one of the ways in which socialization completes our unfinished*

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human nature. It provides social lenses through which we can see meaningful shapes in our largely shapeless experience. Yet, as Zerubavel highlights in this selection, the lenses we acquire through the socialization process not only provide us with ways of seeing and interpreting the stimuli we encounter; they also provide us with filters that prompt us to ignore, disregard, or deny certain stimuli and events. In other words, our social lenses provide us with ways of *not* seeing things. As we learn the culture of our society or group, we quickly learn where we should and should not direct our attention. We are taught the "rules of denial" which instruct us in what we should not observe, acknowledge, or discuss with others. In the process, we learn the social importance of tact and the benefits of "seeing, hearing, and speaking no evil."

... The proverbial line separating what we notice from what we do not notice is largely a product of various physiological constraints imposed by our sensory organs. Our vision, for example, is confined to a limited "field," and much of what lies beyond our visual horizons never even enters our awareness. Similar physiological constraints restrict what we are able to hear and smell.

Yet how we mentally disembed the "figures" we notice from the surrounding "background" that we essentially ignore is only partly dictated by nature. There is no natural filter, for example, that actually separates the sounds we consider part of a concert (and, therefore, "music") from the many sounds (muffled coughs, squeaking chairs) we so casually tune out as background "noise." Nor is it nature that compels jurors to disregard evidence deemed inadmissible in court.

The way we focus our attention often differs from the way many other people do, yet such variance has little to do with our physiology. Unlike the differences between turtles' and eagles' respective ranges of vision or spiders' and gazelles' respective hearing capacities, the difference between what typically catches tourists' and locals' attention, for example, is not a result of any significant difference in their respective sensory capacities.

The nonphysiological, unmistakably social foundations of the way we pay attention to things are quite evident from the way such attending habits vary among different social groups, and as evident from black girls' greater readiness to talk about sex with their mothers than Latina girls,<sup>1</sup> so do our communicating habits. Thus, whereas some professions explicitly limit the scope of their members' attention, others specifically train them to try to notice "everything," as evident from comparing the highly restrictive style of mental focusing so common among experimental researchers (who are trained to manipulate variables in a pronouncedly decontextualized manner) or surgeons to the way police detectives and investigative reporters, for example, are trained to look for evidence practically "everywhere."

The social underpinnings of what we notice and ignore are also evident from the way it shifts historically. Only a few decades ago smoking, for example, was still considered a "background" activity that, like doodling or drinking coffee, others might not even notice. By the same token, while only two generations ago middle-class Americans still regarded skin color as particularly relevant to their social standing, nowadays they often disregard it altogether. Thus, as social attitudes shift, so does our focus.

Consider also the way traditionally overlooked foci of intellectual concern are suddenly foregrounded academically. As their very name suggests, not until the publication of Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* only a little more than a century ago had "Freudian" slips, for example, ever been the subject of a scholarly inquiry. By the same token, not until the publication of Edward Hall's *The Hidden Dimension* in 1966 had anyone ever paid systematic attention to the bubbles of "personal space" with which we surround ourselves when interacting with others.

As evident from looking historically at the amount of exposed female skin that arouses our moral indignation or the number of Americans who are concerned about the hundreds of thousands of



Africans who die from starvation almost every year, our moral horizons also keep shifting. Actual legal rights, in fact, are now extended to social categories such as same-sex couples and the unborn, whose legal standing had not even been considered by most people only a few decades ago. . . .<sup>2</sup>

### Learning to Ignore

Yet while the separation of what we notice from what we ignore is far from strictly natural, nor is it entirely personal. Noticing and ignoring are not just personal acts, since they are always performed by members of particular social communities with particular social conventions of attention and communication.

In fact, the way we focus our attention is often grounded in highly impersonal social traditions of paying attention. So when we notice or ignore something, we therefore often do so as members of particular social communities. Thus, as a twenty-first-century American mortgage broker, for example, one is formally supposed to disregard clients' ethnicity and religious beliefs. By the same token, it is particular social conventions of paying attention that lead us to notice women's breasts while practically ignoring their ears, and particular social traditions of "moral focusing" that lead us to be concerned about some war casualties (women, children, civilians in general) more than others and affect what we come to regard as social problems.<sup>3</sup>

It is hardly a coincidence that the very first person in "The Emperor's New Clothes" to note that the emperor has no clothes is actually a child, who has yet to learn what one is socially supposed not to notice.<sup>4</sup> We normally internalize such traditions of paying attention as part of our socialization.<sup>5</sup> That is where we learn, for example, that we are supposed to disregard applicants' marital status when screening job applications and whether we like particular students when grading their exams. Such socialization may be quite explicit . . . , although it is usually implicit. By simply watching others ignore certain things we learn to ignore them as well. As she listens to her mother's

one-minute account of an entire day they spent together downtown, a young girl tacitly learns what merits social attention and what can actually be ignored. Seeing nobody around her ever mentioning her father's drinking, she likewise learns that it is something one is not supposed to notice.<sup>6</sup>

Needless to say, although one may initially be drawn to a particular profession because it seems to fit one's personal style of mental focusing, the contrast between experimental researchers' and investigative reporters' diametrically opposed focusing habits is most definitely a product of the contrasting manner in which they are professionally socialized to organize their attention. By the same token, if holistic healers are more likely than conventional ear, nose, and throat doctors to also ask patients with ear problems about their neck or shoulders, it is not because they are personally more curious but the result of being professionally socialized to view the entire human body as a single, noncompartmentalized unit.

The considerable extent to which professions' distinctive traditions of paying attention affect what their members notice is particularly evident in science. After all, what scientists actually notice is a product of the specific manner in which they focus their attention as a result of a particular cognitive orientation they acquire as part of their professional socialization. Only by undergoing such socialization do sociologists, for example, acquire the "sociological imagination" that enables them to "see" power structures, labor markets, influence networks, and stratification systems, and only by having done so myself have I developed my own distinctly sociological sensitivity to the collective, normative, and conventional aspects of human cognition. By the same token, as one might suspect, it is their professional socialization that enables radiologists and cardiologists to detect on X-rays and through their stethoscopes early warning signs that others would most likely miss. . . .

Scientists are also professionally socialized to control in their research designs for potentially significant variables they nevertheless choose to





systematically disregard. Indeed, part of what distinguishes members of any given academic discipline from those of any other are the variables they tacitly opt to ignore. By holding these variables constant, they thus transform them from potential "figures" into part of the "background" they can actually ignore. When a criminologist decides to examine the relation between offenders' race and the amount of time it takes them to become eligible for parole, for example, such a decision is likely also to entail efforts to systematically ignore their age and marital status, not to mention the nature of their offense. It also presupposes an implicit prior decision on his or her part to regard their reading habits, table manners, and cholesterol level as irrelevant.

### The Rules of Irrelevance

There is a considerable difference between merely seeing or hearing (that is, perceiving) something and actually noticing (that is, paying attention to) it, as not everything we experience through our senses always captures our attention.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while engaging in a conversation with someone, for example, we rarely notice the color of the buttons on his shirt despite the fact that they are obviously quite visible. By the same token, during business meetings, we hardly ever notice who takes notes. Many of us are likewise quite oblivious to the small children running around us in picnics and large family get-togethers (which indeed makes them, along with housekeepers and janitors, perfect candidates for spying), and it is not uncommon for parents to even make love in the presence of infants.

Yet ignoring something is more than simply failing to notice it. Indeed, it is quite often the result of some pressure to actively disregard it. Such pressure is usually a product of social norms of attention designed to separate what we conventionally consider "noteworthy" from what we come to disregard as mere background "noise."

Consider, for example, the special "norms of focusing" designed to counteract the nonclinical

undertones of the interaction between a woman and her gynecologist. After all, as one astute observer of the peculiar social dynamics of such situations points out, "in the medical world the pelvic area is like any other part of the body [and its] sexual connotations are left behind . . . [Doctors] want it understood that *their gazes take in only medically pertinent facts*, so they are not concerned with an aesthetic inspection of a patient's body."<sup>8</sup> Such norms are embodied in the tacit rules designed to constrain the manner in which those who participate in such situations actually focus their attention. Patients, for example, are thus expected, "to have an attentive glance upward, at the ceiling or at other persons in the room, eyes open, not dreamy or 'away.' [They are] supposed to avoid looking into the doctor's eyes during the actual examination because direct eye contact between the two at this time is provocative."<sup>9</sup>

Similar norms of focusing underlie our ability to mentally separate the persons we consider full-fledged participants in a given social situation from the "nonpersons" such as the above-mentioned small children and janitors whom, although they are physically present there, we nevertheless conventionally ignore. (Indeed, we expect them to "maximally encourage the fiction that they aren't present" and may therefore notice them only when, defying their cognitive marginalization, they actually force themselves into our awareness, as when a kibitzer offers unsolicited advice to chess players or when a cabdriver suddenly joins an ongoing conversation among his passengers).<sup>10</sup> . . .

The normative underpinnings of the mental acts of noticing and ignoring are most spectacularly evident in the tacit social rules that determine what we consider irrelevant. After all, separating the "relevant" from the "irrelevant" is a *sociomental* act performed by members of particular social communities who are socialized to focus only on certain parts or aspects of situations while systematically ignoring others.

To appreciate the extent to which noteworthiness is socially delineated in accordance with such



"rules of irrelevance," note that, with the possible exception of psychotherapy sessions and first dates, where practically everything is considered relevant, social situations are always surrounded by mental frames designed to help separate what we are socially expected to notice from what we are conventionally supposed to ignore. It is such social conventions of mental framing that lead us to consider, for example, players' weight and gender respectively relevant in boxing and tennis yet utterly ignore them in poker and Parcheesi. They also explain why we are much more likely to notice somebody chewing gum at church than on the subway.

The social foundations of relevance are particularly apparent in bureaucracies, where officials' attention is formally confined to the specific functional niches they occupy and all informal aspects of human relations are deemed irrelevant and, consequently, formally ignored.<sup>11</sup> They are also quite apparent in modern law, as manifested in the way juries are formally instructed and repeatedly reminded to focus their attention exclusively on what is rather restrictively defined as "pertinent" to the case in hand. Thus, under the rape-shield law, for example, plaintiffs' prior sexual history is deemed irrelevant and therefore essentially unmentionable. By the same token, under the exclusionary rule, unlawfully obtained evidence, compelling as it may be, is nevertheless considered inadmissible, and if it is ever brought up in court the judge can actually have it officially stricken off the record and order the jury to disregard it.

### Taboo

What society expects us to ignore is often articulated in the form of strict taboos against looking, listening, and speaking. Essentially designed to "keep [our] state of knowledge at a low level" (in fact, the very first prohibition mentioned in the Bible is the one against eating the proverbial fruits of the tree of knowledge),<sup>12</sup> such prohibitions constrain the way we process information. Those who defy or even simply ignore them are considered

social deviants and, as such, are the targets of various social sanctions.<sup>13</sup>

Essentially characterized by a strong emphasis on avoidance, these taboos often manifest themselves in the form of strict prohibitions against looking or listening. Thus, among the Australian aborigines, for example, visual as well as aural access to the sacred is strictly forbidden to the profane: "A corpse . . . is sometimes taken out of sight, the face being covered in such a way that it cannot be seen. . . . There are ritual songs that women must not hear, on pain of death."<sup>14</sup> The biblical and Greek mythological accounts of the lethal punishment divinely inflicted on Lot's wife and Orpheus for having broken certain taboos against looking are classic examples of efforts made by society to describe the fate of those who choose to ignore or defy its norms of attention by becoming overly curious.

Yet as the familiar image of the three wise monkeys so perfectly reminds us, strict taboos on looking or listening are often coupled with functionally complementary prohibitions against speaking. Thus, on various ceremonial occasions, for example, silence is obligatory, and "if there is talking, it is in a low voice and with the lips only."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, there are certain things that are never supposed to be discussed, or sometimes even mentioned, at all.

Consider here also the strong taboo, so memorably depicted in films like *Prince of the City*, *Mississippi Burning*, *In the Heat of the Night*, *A Few Good Men*, *Bad Day at Black Rock*, or *Serpico*, against washing one's community's "dirty laundry" in public. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are informal codes of silence such as the *omerta*, the traditional Sicilian code of honor that prohibits Mafia members from "ratting" on fellow members, or the infamous "blue wall of silence" that, ironically enough, similarly prevents police officers from reporting corrupt fellow officers, not to mention the actual secrecy oaths people must take in order to become members of secret societies or underground movements. Equally prohibitive are the "cultures of silence" that prevent oil workers



from reporting oil spills and fraternity members from testifying against fellow brothers facing rape charges, and that have led senior tobacco company executives to suppress the findings of studies showing the incontrovertible health risks involved in smoking, and prevented the typically sensationalist, gossipy British and American press from publicizing the imminent abdication of King Edward VIII in 1936 or the sexual indiscretions of President John F. Kennedy.<sup>16</sup>

A most effective way to make sure that people would actually stay away from conversational “no-go zones” is to keep the tabooed object nameless, as when Catholic preachers, for example, carefully avoid mentioning sodomy (the “nameless sin”) by name. It is as if refraining from talking about something will ultimately make it virtually unthinkable, as in the famous dystopian world of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where it was practically impossible “to follow a heretical thought further than the perception that it was heretical; beyond that point the necessary words were nonexistent.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, the underlying assumption behind the social taboo on the use of various sex-related (“dirty”) words is that it is quite possible to actually eliminate certain ideas by sanitizing our discourse. To quote Michel Foucault,

in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate [sex] at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present. And even these prohibitions, it seems, were afraid to name it. Without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through . . . muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence.<sup>18</sup>

A somewhat milder form of verbal avoidance involves the use of euphemisms (the “ladies’ room,” the “F word”), which allow their users to invoke taboo subjects yet at the same time avoid mentioning them. Thus, by using euphemisms

such as “medical experiments,” one can somewhat indirectly allude to one’s heinous activities as a Nazi doctor in Auschwitz without ever mentioning them explicitly.<sup>19</sup> By the same token, by using the rather innocuous brand name “Tampax,” advertisers can actually invoke a highly taboo subject like menstruation while still keeping it technically undiscussable, which brings to mind the story about the little boy who, naively enough, wanted to get the seemingly magical product for his birthday after having seen on a television commercial that one can do practically anything (swim, bowl, ski, ride a horse, play tennis) with it. Euphemisms are indeed the “deodorant of language,” as they constitute a “code of silent omissions” functionally equivalent to the “preliminary shower-bath that renders anti-perspirants unnecessary.”<sup>20</sup> That, of course, presupposes the understanding that they would in fact provide a protective shield rather than become the very objects of the actual process of shielding, as one is reminded by the joke about the man who, constantly nagged by his wife to tell their son about “the birds and the bees,” finally tells him: “Remember the gentleman and the lady we saw last Sunday behind the trees in the park? Remember what they were doing? Well, the birds and the bees do the same!”

### Tact

Yet much of what we are expected to ignore is socially articulated in the even milder form of tact. Although social scientists have yet to even notice the connection between them, tact is but a “soft” version of taboo, and etiquette rules of religious prohibitions. Rules of tact thus usually take the form of subtle (“it might be considered rude”) guidelines for polite conduct rather than explicit (“it is strictly forbidden”) injunctions. Not surprisingly, unlike taboos, they generally provide us with a somewhat better understanding of the social dynamics of conspiracies of silence generated by embarrassment rather than by fear.

Essentially based on avoidance, such “negative politeness” involves staying away from potentially



"sensitive" information one has not been invited to access. As so evocatively captured in the image of the proverbial monkey who hears no evil, that involves certain norms of discourse intended to prevent us from asking other people about "delicate" matters like marital problems, miscarriages, or suicides. Such norms usually take the form of special rules of etiquette designed to keep us from "prying." To quote from a popular guide to "polite" conduct:

Suppose you go around and find out how old everybody you meet is and how much they paid for their houses. Suppose each person with what you considered a physical oddity informed you in detail why he or she limped. . . .

Suppose all single people explained to you why they were single . . . and every adult stated a rationale for the . . . nonexistence of his or her children. Suppose that upon greeting someone, you were able to find out immediately how old each piece of clothing he or she wore was, where it was bought, and for how much. . . . [W]hy don't people quit asking such questions at every opportunity and go back to the system in which it was off-bounds to ferret information out of people and each person was allowed to volunteer topics he wished to discuss?<sup>21</sup>

As evident from the way we usually react to "nosy" people who actually do pry, being tactless is generally considered a form of social deviance. Indeed, friends and neighbors may even go as far as to dismiss possible signs of domestic violence (loud altercations, bruises) as private matters one should ignore to avoid being considered nosy.

Needless to say, ignoring someone's stutter, heavy accent, bad breath, or open fly out of politeness is clearly not the result of simply failing to notice it. Nor, for that matter, is it a hearing problem that normally prevents us from eavesdropping on easily overheard conversations taking place around us in a crowded restaurant or a foreign language we are mistakenly presumed not to understand. Indeed, these are all socially expected displays of "civil inattention."<sup>22</sup>

Aside from the pressure to see and hear no evil, there is also a strong social pressure not to acknowledge the fact that we sometimes do indeed see or hear it. Not only are we expected to refrain from asking potentially embarrassing questions, we are also expected to pretend not to have heard potentially embarrassing "answers" even when we actually have. By not acknowledging what we have in fact seen or heard, we can "tactfully" pretend not to have noticed it.

The fact that the verbs "to notice" and "to remark" are denoted in French by a single word (*remarquer*) reminds us how closely related noticing something and publicly acknowledging having noticed it actually are. Yet the fact that in English, by contrast, they nevertheless seem to require two separate words underscores how much those acts are normatively separated from each other. And the difference between what we actually notice and what we publicly acknowledge having noticed is at the very heart of what it means to be tactful.

Being tactful, in other words, often involves pretending not to notice things we "know but realize that [we] are supposed not to know."<sup>23</sup> Thus, one acts tactfully when one "passes over something . . . and leaves it unsaid."<sup>24</sup> As when we forgive someone or pretend to have forgotten the promise he once made to us but never kept, being tactful involves at least outwardly treating things we actually do notice as if they are somehow irrelevant and, as such, can be practically ignored.

More specifically, it often involves trying to ensure that others don't realize we actually do notice certain embarrassing things about them. By acting as if we are somehow "unmindful" of them, we thus try to convey to them that they do not constitute "target[s] of special curiosity" for us, as so poignantly captured in the tongue-in-cheek definition of a polite man as someone who, having mistakenly entered the ladies' showers, quickly apologizes to the naked woman he sees standing there: "Excuse me, sir."<sup>25</sup> Thus, when others make an embarrassing faux pas, for example, we can "feign inattention" and pretend to "tactfully not see" it.<sup>26</sup>



Needless to say, the distinction between tact and taboo is not as clear-cut as it may seem. Indeed, it becomes somewhat fuzzy when one considers, for example, the kind of silence produced by political correctness, as when people refrain from using race labels to avoid the risk of being considered racist.<sup>17</sup> Such "polite repression" is quite peculiar to social environments and situations lacking clear power structures and some element of coercion. As one might expect, the particular forms of silencing it involves are therefore quite different from the ones one encounters . . . in social environments and situations involving clear power relations.

### Notes

1. See Jill M. Taylor et al., *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 99–106.
2. See also Christopher D. Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing?* (Los Altos, CA: William Kaufmann, 1974), 6–7.
3. See Asia Friedman, "Sex Seen: The Socio-Optical Construction of Sexed Bodies," presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, August 2004; Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes*, 39; Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
4. Eviatar Zerubavel, "Personal Information and Social Life," *Symbolic Interaction* 5, no. 1 (1982), 107. See also Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 44; Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (eds.), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 83.
5. Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes*, 32–33, 46–51.
6. Marion H. Typpo and Jill M. Hastings, *An Elephant in the Living Room: Leader's Guide for Helping Children of Alcoholics* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1984), i.
7. Ernest G. Schachtel, *Metamorphosis: On the Development of Affect, Perception, Attention, and Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 251–78; Arien Mack and Irvin Rock, *Inattentional Blindness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).
8. Joan P. Emerson, "Behavior in Private Places: Sustaining Definitions of Reality in Gynecological Examinations," in Hans-Peter Dreitzel (ed.), *Recent Sociology No. 2: Patterns of Communicative Behavior* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 78 [emphasis added].
9. *Ibid.*, 83. See also 86.
10. Erving Goffman, "Footings," in *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981 [1979]), 132. See also Erving Goffman, "Fun in Games," in *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961), 63–64; Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1974), 225.
11. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000 [1989]), 100–101; Zerubavel, *The Fine Line*, 59.
12. Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (New York: Grove Press, 1975 [1967]), 91; Genesis 2:16–17.
13. Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes*, 32.
14. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995 [1912]), 308–9.
15. *Ibid.*, 309–10.
16. Thomas D. Beamish, *Silent Spill: The Organization of an Industrial Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 66–70; Patricia Y. Martin and Robert A. Hummer, "Fraternalities and Rape on Campus," *Gender and Society* 3 (1989): 463–64; Dominic Casciani, "How the Media Covered Up the Scandal," *BBC News* (World Edition), January 30, 2003, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/2707571.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/2707571.stm); "Mrs. Simpson Had Secret Lover," CNN.com, January 30, 2003, [www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/europe/01/29/edward.files/](http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/europe/01/29/edward.files/). See also David Caute, *The Espionage of the Saints: Two Essays on Silence and the State* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), ix; Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 66.
17. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: New American Library, 1961 [1949]), 252.
18. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon, 1978 [1976]), vol. 1, 17. See also 3–5.



19. Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 445–46. See also Robert J. Lifton, “Imagining the Real,” in Robert J. Lifton and Richard Falk (eds.), *Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case against Nuclearism* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 107.
20. Robert M. Adams, “Soft Soap and the Nitty-Gritty,” in D. J. Enright (ed.), *Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 48.
21. Martin, *Miss Manners’ Guide for the Turn-of-the-Millennium*, 100. See also 94–95, 106–13, 562–63; Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 229.
22. Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, 84–87. See also Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 230; Goffman, “Fun in Games,” 63.
23. Lily Pincus and Christopher Dare, *Secrets in the Family* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 145. See also Martin, *Miss Manners’ Guide for the Turn-of-the-Millennium*, 147.
24. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975 [1960]), 16–17.
25. Goffman, “Fun in Games,” 56; Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, 84; François Truffaut, *Stolen Kisses*. See also Martin S. Weinberg, “Sexual Modesty, Social Meanings, and the Nudist Camp,” *Social Problems* 12 (1965), 311–18.
26. Goffman, “Fun in Games,” 55; Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 231. See also Erving Goffman, “On Face Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction,” in *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1967 [1955]), 18.
27. Mica Pollock, *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

### Reflective Questions

1. In what sense are human perceptions biological? In what sense are they social? How are your perceptions shaped by culture, language, and your

interactions with others? For example, how do your friends or family influence what you see, what you talk about, and what you don’t talk about? What “rules of denial” do you observe when you are interacting with them?

2. Look up the lyrics of three or four popular songs that focus on romantic love. What do the lyrics suggest about what it means to be in love? What do they say about what you should notice, emphasize, or ignore in a lover? What do they say about how you should experience and act upon feelings of romantic love? What do the lyrics suggest about what is irrelevant or taboo when it comes to love?
3. Think about what you are learning in your major. What has it taught you to focus upon? What has it taught you to ignore, overlook, or disregard, especially as you engage in research or creative activity? What are the key rules of irrelevance and denial in your major? In other words, what realities does it enable you to see and understand, and what does it discourage you from seeing or understanding?
4. Take the “Selective Attention Test” at the following YouTube link: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo). What were you told to focus upon when watching the video? What did you see? Were you able to answer the experimenter’s questions correctly? What things were invisible to you as you watched the video? Why were they invisible? Ask your friends to take the test and see if they have the same experience as you did. The designer of the selective attention test noted that “Once people find the first thing they’re looking for, they often don’t notice other things.” Why is this the case?
5. What are some of the taboos and rules of denial you have learned in your family? For instance, what have you learned you should not think or talk about? How did you learn these rules? Do these rules vary when you’re in different contexts or groups? If so, how and why is this the case? How do sexual rules and taboos vary by gender in your culture? How does this shape the way men and women talk about and experience their sexuality?



## The Meme Machine

SUSAN BLACKMORE

*The history of Western thought is full of dualistic conceptions of human nature. Human "being" is variously separated into body and soul, sensation and reason, and physicality and cognition. These separations of human being into distinct and opposing parts have led to a number of debates over which side predominates. Does nature or nurture primarily determine individuals' thoughts, feelings, or actions? Is the principal source of human knowledge perception or reflection? Is "mind" just another word for the biochemical operations of the nervous system, or is it irreducible to biological processes? Although these and other debates continue, the theories that emphasize the physical and genetic side of human being seem to have the advantage today. When addressing questions about why people act the way they do, analysts often point to the impact of genetic, biochemical, or physiological factors.*

*In the following selection, Susan Blackmore addresses the question of what forces and characteristics most powerfully shape human conduct. At the same time, she grapples with the question of what, if anything, makes people unique members of the animal kingdom. In doing so Blackmore describes the limitations of perspectives that emphasize the distinctiveness of qualities such as consciousness, speech, superior intelligence, or the ability to learn. Blackmore asserts that what makes human beings such special (and strange) creatures is our ability to imitate others.*

*This ability enables us to replicate things and to easily pass on knowledge and actions to one another. Blackmore also highlights the importance of the "meme" in facilitating our capacity to imitate. Memes serve as vital replicators that allow us to pass along thoughts, feelings, and actions to one another. Some examples of memes include words, songs, fashions, ideas, and ways of doing things.*

*Although Blackmore's arguments differ in some notable ways from insights highlighted in previous selections, they echo the emphasis these selections placed on symbols in shaping human perception and behavior. Memes rely on symbols and language to be transmitted and replicated. While acknowledging this point, Blackmore contends that memes, like genes, have one overarching and "selfish" goal—to be copied and spread. And because of people's ability to imitate, they are ideal hosts for memes.*

*Blackmore's conclusions challenge prevailing Western views that emphasize the significance of biology, genetics, or personal traits in shaping our actions and interactions. She claims that it's the meme, as a unit of cultural transmission, that serves as a key influence in our lives. She also notes that from a meme's "point of view," we are simply vessels through which it can reproduce itself. In responding to this assertion, sociological psychologists point out that people exercise a measure of agency, or freedom, in creating, reproducing, and rejecting memes. We are more*

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*than merely vehicles for the transmission of memes. Because memes are embedded in language, we have the same relationship to memes as we have to words and other symbols. That is, while symbols influence how we see and understand things, they do not simply determine how we respond to those things. We shape and reshape the meanings of symbols, including memes, in response to our ever-changing experiences of the world and the people around us.*

We humans are strange creatures. There is no doubt that our bodies evolved by natural selection just as other animals' did. Yet we differ from all other creatures in many ways. For a start, we speak. We believe ourselves to be the most intelligent species on the planet. We are extraordinarily widespread and extremely versatile in our ways of making a living. We wage wars, believe in religions, bury our dead and get embarrassed about sex. We watch television, drive cars and eat ice cream. We have had such a devastating impact upon the ecosystems of our planet that we appear to be in danger of destroying everything on which our lives depend. One of the problems of being a human is that it is rather hard to look at humans with an unprejudiced eye.

On the one hand, we are obviously animals comparable with any others. We have lungs, hearts, and brains made of living cells; we eat and breathe and reproduce. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection can successfully explain how we, along with the rest of life on this planet, came to be here, and why we all share so many characteristics. On the other hand, we behave quite differently from other animals. Now that biology has so successfully explained much of our similarity with other creatures we need to ask the opposite question. What makes us so different? Could it be our superior intelligence, our consciousness, our language, or what? A common answer is that we are simply more intelligent than any other species. Yet the notion of intelligence is extremely slippery, with interminable arguments about how to define it, how to measure it, and to what extent it

is inherited. Research in artificial intelligence (AI) has provided some nice surprises for those who thought they knew what makes human intelligence so special.

In the early days of AI, researchers thought that if they could teach a computer to play chess they would have reproduced one of the highest forms of human intelligence. In those days the idea that a computer could ever play well, let alone beat a Grand Master, was unthinkable. Yet now most home computers come with passable chess programs already installed, and in 1997 the program Deep Blue beat World Champion Garry Kasparov, ending unquestioned human supremacy at the game. Computers may not play chess in the same way as humans, but their success shows how wrong we can be about intelligence. Clearly, what we thought were human beings' most special capabilities may not be.

Quite the opposite goes for some apparently quite unintelligent things like cleaning the house, digging the garden, or making a cup of tea. Time and again AI researchers have tried to build robots to carry out such tasks and been defeated. The first problem is that the tasks all require vision. There is a popular (though possibly apocryphal) story about Marvin Minsky at MIT (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) that he once gave his graduate students the problem of vision as a summer project. Decades later the problem of computer vision is still just that—a problem. We humans can see so effortlessly that we cannot begin to imagine how complex the process has to be. And in any case, this kind of intelligence cannot distinguish us from other animals because they can see too.

If intelligence does not provide simple answers perhaps consciousness might. Many people believe that human consciousness is unique and is responsible for making us human. Yet scientists cannot even define the term "consciousness." Everyone knows what their own consciousness is like but they cannot share that knowledge with anyone else. This troublesome fact—the subjectivity of consciousness—may explain why for most of this



century the whole topic of consciousness was more or less banned from scientific discussion. Now at last it has become fashionable again, but scientists and philosophers cannot even agree on what an explanation of consciousness would look like. Some say that the "Hard Problem" of subjectivity is quite different from any other scientific problem and needs a totally new kind of solution, while others are sure that when we fully understand brain function and behavior the problem of consciousness will have disappeared.

Some people believe in the existence of a human soul or spirit that transcends the physical brain and explains human uniqueness. With the decline in religious belief fewer and fewer people intellectually accept that view, yet most of us continue to think of ourselves as a little conscious "me" inside our brain; a "me" who sees the world, makes the decisions, directs the actions and has responsibility for them.

As we shall see later, this view has to be wrong. Whatever the brain is doing it does not seem to need help from an extra, magical self. Various parts of the brain carry on their tasks independently of each other and countless different things are always going on at once. We may feel as though there is a central place inside our heads in to which the sensations come and from which we consciously make the decisions. Yet this place simply does not exist. Clearly, something is very wrong with our ordinary view of our conscious selves. From this confused viewpoint we cannot say with certainty that other animals are not conscious, nor that consciousness is what makes us unique. So what does?

### What Makes Us Different?

The thesis of this [essay] is that what makes us different is our ability to imitate.

Imitation comes naturally to us humans. Have you ever sat and blinked, or waved, or "goo goood," or even just smiled, at a baby? What happens? Very often they blink too, or wave, or smile back at you. We do it so easily, even as an infant. We copy each other all the time. Like seeing, it comes so effortlessly

that we hardly think about it. We certainly do not think of it as being something very clever. Yet, as we shall see, it is fantastically clever.

Certainly, other animals do not take naturally to it. Blink, or wave, or smile at your dog or cat and what happens? She might purr, wag her tail, twitch, or walk away, but you can be pretty sure she will not imitate you. You can teach a cat, or rat, to beg neatly for its food by progressively rewarding it, but you cannot teach it by demonstrating the trick yourself—nor can another cat or rat. Years of detailed research on animal imitation has led to the conclusion that it is extremely rare. . . . Though we may think of mother cats as teaching their kittens to hunt, or groom, or use the cat door, they do not do it by demonstration or imitation. Parent birds "teach" their babies to fly more by pushing them out of the nest and giving them the chance to try it than by demonstrating the required skills for them to copy.

There is a special appeal to stories of animals copying human behavior, and pet owners are fond of such tales. I read on the Internet about a cat who learned to flush the toilet and soon taught a second cat the same trick. Now the two of them sit together on the cistern flushing away. A more reliable anecdote was told by Diana Reiss, a psychologist at Rutgers University. She works with bottlenose dolphins, who are known to be able to copy vocal sounds and artificial whistles, as well as simple actions (Bauer and Johnson 1994; Reiss and McGowan 1993). She trained the dolphins by giving them fish as a reward and also by a "time out" procedure for punishment. If they did the wrong thing she would walk away from the water's edge and wait for one minute before returning to the pool. One day she threw a fish to one of the dolphins but had accidentally left on some spiky bits of fin. Immediately the dolphin turned, swam away, and waited for a minute at the other side of the pool.

That story touched me because I could not help thinking of the dolphins as understanding the action, as having intelligence and consciousness



and intentionality like ours. But we cannot even define these things, let alone be sure that the dolphin was using them in this apparent act of reciprocation. What we can see is that it imitated Dr. Reiss in an appropriate way. We are so oblivious to the cleverness of imitation that we do not even notice how rare it is in other animals and how often we do it ourselves.

Perhaps more telling is that we do not have separate words for radically different kinds of learning. We use the same word "learning" for simple association or "classical conditioning" (which almost all animals can do), for learning by trial and error or "operant conditioning" (which many animals can do), and for learning by imitation (which almost none can do). I want to argue that the supreme ease with which we are capable of imitation, has blinded us to this simple fact—that imitation is what makes us special.

### Imitation and the Meme

When you imitate someone else, something is passed on. This "something" can then be passed on again, and again, and so take on a life of its own. We might call this thing an idea, an instruction, a behavior, a piece of information . . . but if we are going to study it we shall need to give it a name.

Fortunately, there is a name. It is the "meme."

The term "meme" first appeared in 1976, in Richard Dawkins's best-selling book, *The Selfish Gene*. In that book Dawkins, an Oxford zoologist, popularized the increasingly influential view that evolution is best understood in terms of the competition between genes. Earlier in the twentieth century, biologists had blithely talked about evolution occurring for the "good of the species" without worrying about the exact mechanisms involved, but in the 1960s serious problems with this view began to be recognized (Williams 1966). For example, if a group of organisms all act for the good of the group then one individual who does not can easily exploit the rest. He will then leave more descendants who in turn do not act for the group, and the group benefit will be lost. On the more modern

"gene's eye view," evolution may appear to proceed in the interests of the individual, or for the good of the species, but in fact it is all driven by the competition between genes. This new viewpoint provided a much more powerful understanding of evolution and has come to be known as "selfish-gene theory."

We must be absolutely clear about what "selfish" means in this context. It does not mean genes for selfishness. Such genes would incline their carriers to act selfishly and that is something quite different. The term "selfish" here means that the genes act only for themselves; their only interest is their own replication; all they want is to be passed on to the next generation. Of course, genes do not "want" or have aims or intentions in the same way as people do; they are only chemical instructions that can be copied. So when I say they "want" or are "selfish" I am using a shorthand, but this shorthand is necessary to avoid lengthy explanations. It will not lead us astray if we remember that genes either are or are not successful at getting passed on into the next generation. So the shorthand "genes want" can always be spelled out as "genes that do x are more likely to be passed on." This is the only power they have—replicator power. And it is in this sense that they are selfish.

Dawkins also introduced the important distinction between "replicators" and their "vehicles." A replicator is anything of which copies are made, including "active replicators" whose nature affects the chances of their being copied again. A vehicle is the entity that interacts with the environment, which is why Hull (1988) prefers the term "interactors" for a similar idea. Vehicles or interactors carry the replicators around inside them and protect them. The original replicator was presumably a simple self-copying molecule in the primeval soup, but our most familiar replicator now is DNA. Its vehicles are organisms and groups of organisms that interact with each other as they live out their lives in the seas or the air, the forests or fields. Genes are the selfish replicators that drive the evolution of the biological world here on earth but Dawkins believes there is a more fundamental principle at work. He



suggested that wherever it arises, anywhere in the universe, "all life evolves by the differential survival of replicating entities" (1976, p. 192). This is the foundation for the idea of Universal Darwinism; the application of Darwinian thinking way beyond the confines of biological evolution.

At the very end of the book he asked an obvious, if provocative, question. Are there any other replicators on our planet? The answer, he claimed, is "Yes." Staring us in the face, although still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup of culture, is another replicator—a unit of imitation.

We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. "Mimeme" comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like "gene." I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme.

As examples, Dawkins suggested "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches." He mentioned scientific ideas that catch on and propagate themselves around the world by jumping from brain to brain. He wrote about religions as groups of memes with a high survival value, infecting whole societies with belief in a God or an afterlife. He talked about fashions in dress or diet, and about ceremonies, customs, and technologies—all of which are spread by one person copying another. Memes are stored in human brains (or books or inventions) and passed on by imitation.

In a few pages, Dawkins laid the foundations for understanding the evolution of memes. He discussed their propagation by jumping from brain to brain, likened them to parasites infecting a host, treated them as physically realized living structures, and showed how mutually assisting memes will gang together in groups just as genes do. Most importantly, he treated the meme as a replicator in its own right. He complained that many of his colleagues seemed unable to accept the idea that memes would spread for their own benefit, independently of any benefit to the genes. "In the last analysis they wish always to go back to 'biological

advantage' to answer questions about human behavior." Yes, he agreed, we got our brains for biological (genetic) reasons but now that we have them a new replicator has been unleashed. "Once this new evolution begins, it will in no necessary sense be subservient to the old" (Dawkins 1976, pp. 193–4). In other words, memetic evolution can now take off without regard to its effects on the genes.

If Dawkins is right, then human life is permeated through and through with memes and their consequences. Everything you have learned by imitation from someone else is a meme. But we must be clear what is meant by the word "imitation," because our whole understanding of memetics depends on it. Dawkins said that memes jump from "brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (1976, p. 192). I will also use the term "imitation" in the broad sense. So if, for example, a friend tells you a story and you remember the gist and pass it on to someone else then that counts as imitation. You have not precisely imitated your friend's every action and word, but something (the gist of the story) has been copied from her to you and then on to someone else. This is the "broad sense" in which we must understand the term "imitation." If in doubt, remember that something must have been copied.

Everything that is passed from person to person in this way is a meme. This includes all the words in your vocabulary, the stories you know, the skills and habits you have picked up from others and the games you like to play. It includes the songs you sing and the rules you obey. So, for example, whenever you drive on the left (or the right!), eat curry with lager or pizza and coke, whistle the theme tune from *Neighbors* or even shake hands, you are dealing in memes. Each of these memes has evolved in its own unique way with its own history, but each of them is using your behavior to get itself copied.

Take the song "Happy Birthday to You." Millions of people—probably thousands of millions of people the world over—know this tune. Indeed, I only have to write down those four words to have a pretty good idea that you may soon start



humming it to yourself. Those words affect you, probably quite without any conscious intention on your part, by stirring up a memory you already possess. And where did that come from? Like millions of other people, you have acquired it by imitation. Something, some kind of information, some kind of instruction, has become lodged in all those brains so that now we all do the same thing at birthday parties. That something is what we call the meme.

Memes spread themselves around indiscriminately without regard to whether they are useful, neutral, or positively harmful to us. A brilliant new scientific idea, or a technological invention, may spread because of its usefulness. A song like Jingle Bells may spread because it sounds OK, though it is not seriously useful and can definitely get on your nerves. But some memes are positively harmful—like chain letters and pyramid selling, new methods of fraud and false doctrines, ineffective slimming diets and dangerous medical “cures.” Of course, the memes do not care; they are selfish like genes and will simply spread if they can.

Remember that the same shorthand applies to memes as to genes. We can say that memes are “selfish,” that they “do not care,” that they “want” to propagate themselves, and so on, when all we mean is that successful memes are the ones that get copied and spread, while unsuccessful ones do not. This is the sense in which memes “want” to get copied, “want” you to pass them on and “do not care” what that means to you or your genes.

This is the power behind the idea of memes. To start to think memetically we have to make a giant flip in our minds just as biologists had to do when taking on the idea of the selfish gene. Instead of thinking of our ideas as our own creations, and as working for us, we have to think of them as autonomous selfish memes, working only to get themselves copied. We humans, because of our powers of imitation, have become just the physical “hosts”

needed for the memes to get around. This is how the world looks from a “meme’s eye view.”

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### Reflective Questions

1. According to Blackmore, what ability makes us unique as human beings? Why does it make us distinctive? How do memes and language facilitate this ability? What does Blackmore mean when she says memes are “selfish”?
2. What is a meme? How do memes serve as replicators that “jump from brain to brain”? Think of a song you really like. Is it a meme? Have you memorized its lyrics? Have you shared it with others? How does it influence the way you think or act?
3. What’s an example of a meme that you share with your friends or family? How did this meme get created or adopted? How does it get sustained? Has it changed in any ways over time? If so, how and why has it changed?
4. Talk with two or three friends or classmates and create a meme. Then try to spread it to others and get them to copy it. What strategies did you use when trying to share your meme? Was it successful or unsuccessful? Why? According to Blackmore, what makes a meme successful?



## PART

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# The Social Shaping of Subjective Experience

Sociological psychologists stress that once we acquire language and develop a self, we have ourselves as companions. That is, we can think and converse with ourselves in the same ways we communicate with others. We can also define and interpret our own experience through inner conversations. The language, symbols, and understandings that we draw upon in conversing with ourselves are not of our own invention. We have learned them through our interactions with others. Thus, our inner reality and its meanings are socially influenced in the same manner as the outer reality we share with others.

The selections in Part II address the social construction of subjective experience. They examine the social shaping of our seemingly individual thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. Each selection illustrates that sociological understanding, rather than being skin deep, reaches into the depths of our individual minds, hearts, and senses. It can do so because the social life we share with others gets under our skin, creating social lives within each of us.



In examining how social life gets under our skin and shapes our inner experiences, the five selections in this section offer the following insights:

- *Our experience of bodily senses and states are, to a significant degree, products of socially influenced interpretation and somatic work.* We make sense of our bodily sensations, or “inner worlds,” through the same processes of naming and interpretation that we use to give meaning to the external world. We do not automatically react to physical or bodily sensations; instead, we define and interpret them. These definitions and interpretations are profoundly shaped by social meanings, expectations, and interactions. For instance, as we experience a sensation, such as the smell of cookies baking, we make sense of it in terms of relevant memories, associations, and relationships. If we link this smell to memories of a loving parent or a special family holiday, we will define or experience it positively. By contrast, if we associate it with working long and grueling hours at a bakery, we will interpret and experience it much less favorably.
- *Our perceptions and our experience of bodily sensations, including emotions, are structured by social rules and cultural expectations.* While we often think of emotions as biological, or as originating in our bodies, they arise out of our interactions with others and they are shaped by the social definitions and feeling rules provided by the groups to which we belong. Through our interactions with others in these groups, we learn an unwritten set of expectations about how to feel and how to express those feelings in various situations. For example, in Western societies we typically learn that the feeling of romantic love is very important, especially in selecting a potential marital partner. We also learn that the object of our romantic attraction “should be” a member of the opposite sex, that we should only have romantic feelings for one person at a time, and that this person should not have a romantic relationship with anyone else. If we violate these emotional norms, we discover that others will quickly remind us that we need to get our feelings “under control.”
- *To keep our emotions in line with the social expectations that prevail in a given group or setting, we engage in various forms of “emotion work” and draw upon a variety of emotion management strategies.* One of these strategies is “surface acting,” or playing the part expected of us in a given context even if our mood or feelings do not match that part. Another is “deep acting,” which involves suppressing inappropriate feelings and self-consciously calling forth feelings that match the demands of the situation or the emotional expressions we are conveying to others. Professionals routinely engage in these forms of emotion work as they respond to uncomfortable or anxiety-provoking situations.



For instance, professionals learn to deal with uncomfortable or distressing experiences by drawing on strategies such as transforming the meaning of these experiences, using humor to relieve their own discomfort, focusing on the rewarding elements of their work, redirecting or avoiding troubling feelings, and maintaining affective neutrality.<sup>1</sup>

Most crucially, through engaging in this kind of emotion work, we learn how to translate our experiences into feelings and actions that fit with the demands of a given situation. We also learn to use our emotions for dramaturgical reasons—that is, we learn to use feelings, moods, and emotional expressions to communicate information about ourselves to others and to influence how others define and act toward us. Thus, when we engage in interpersonal emotion management, we take part in the exercise of power. As Christian Vaccaro and his colleagues demonstrate in their study of Mixed Martial Arts fighters (Selection 9), the dramaturgical display of emotion allows the fighters not only to call forth and reshape intense feelings within themselves, but also to evoke desired sentiments in their opponents. It also enables the fighters to convey their emotions in a highly gendered manner. In other words, their emotional displays serve as means for them to express and manage their “manhood.”

- Finally, *groups and organizations, as well as individuals, define and manage bodily states and emotions.* In recent years, sociologists and sociological psychologists have focused increased attention on how groups and organizations shape and manage bodies, feelings, and the experience of embodiment. As Nancy Berns demonstrates in Selection 8, the rise of “closure” as a contemporary emotion has been promoted by a variety of organizations, including funeral homes, pet grief businesses, pro-death penalty groups, and the “divorce party” industry. These organizations market the need for closure as a way to sell their services to people suffering from painful losses. They also offer grieving individuals an interpretive frame that tells them why they need closure to alleviate their sorrow and how they can satisfy this alleged emotional need. In so doing, these organizations shape the inner experience of the distressed, telling them how to make sense of their loss, how to talk about it with others, and how to manage, reduce, or resolve the painful feelings it evokes.

In Selection 10, Jackson and Wingfield illustrate how emotions are collectively managed and expressed within a campus organization for black men. In the process, they illustrate important dimensions of emotion work that researchers have often overlooked; that is, how feeling rules are racialized and how this shapes the management and expression of emotions, particularly within African American organizations in predominantly white settings.





On a broader level, the selections in Part II hint at the growing involvement of organizations in the business of emotion work. A plethora of organizations, such as self-help groups, therapeutic clinics, political advocacy groups, social networking sites, death care businesses, professional associations, and multinational corporations are engaged in telling us how to manage our feelings. In the process, these organizations offer us a broad range of resources (e.g., routines, medications, ideologies, support systems, identity narratives, and emotion work strategies) that we can use to structure our emotional experiences. In turn, a growing number of us are relying on organizations to help us understand and manage what is going on “inside” of us. This trend demonstrates how organizations succeed in getting under our skin and how we often invite them to do so.

**Note**

1. See Allen C. Smith and Sherry Kleinman, “Managing Emotions in Medical School: Student Contacts with the Living and the Dead,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 52(1) (1986): 56–69, and Clinton Sanders, “Working Out Back: The Veterinary Technician and ‘Dirty Work,’” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 39(3) (2010): 243–72.





## Smell, Odor, and Somatic Work

DENNIS D. WASKUL AND PHILLIP VANNINI

*In recent years researchers have focused increased attention on the "sociology of the senses," or how human senses and perceptions are influenced by social factors. Sociological interest in this topic has a long history, as illustrated in the analyses of Georg Simmel and George Herbert Mead, who wrote in the late 1800s and early 1900s. While Simmel emphasized the important role that our senses play in facilitating social interaction, it was Mead who highlighted how our social experiences and interactions get built right into our central nervous systems, thereby having a profound impact on how we perceive the world and ourselves.*

*Inspired by the insights of both Simmel and Mead, the following selection by Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini presents an innovative study of socio-somatics, or how the social world shapes our bodily sensations and processes. Drawing on data derived from journals kept by twenty-three graduate students, Waskul and Vannini demonstrate how one of our most powerful senses—smell—is informed and influenced by social meanings and expectations. They point out that to sense a smell, whether it is the smell of freshly baked cookies, a scented candle, or a pile of cow manure, is to make sense of it. That is, the act of smelling is marked by somatic work, or the process of interpreting bodily sensation and perception. Our interpretation of a particular smell, such as the odor of a turkey baking, is shaped by a variety of social*

*factors, including our interactions, relationships, experiences, and memories of those experiences.*

*Waskul and Vannini also reveal how our sense of smell, like other perceptions, is structured by somatic rules grounded in cultural norms and linked to a larger moral order. In essence, the meanings we give to smells are commonly linked to value judgments. These value judgments are rooted in cultural expectations regarding the proper intensity of odors, the appropriate context for these odors, and the character assessments associated with "bad" or offensive odors, such as the smells that are emitted by either end of the human digestive system or by unwashed armpits. We attach moral judgments to these smells, and we tend to regard those who emit these bad odors as "bad" people. Because of these judgments, the management of odor is a core feature of our everyday interactions and identity work. As Waskul and Vannini observe, we carefully and strategically manipulate the odors on our bodies and in our environments to get others to view us favorably. Like most of us, the respondents in their study took great care to regulate their bodily odors and to remedy any undesirable scents, including bathroom odors, when they occurred. Thus, they became centrally concerned with odor management, or "smelling nice," as they presented themselves to others. They recognized that managing odors was an essential feature of managing the impressions of others.*

Reprinted from: Dennis D. Waskul and Phillip Vannini, "Smell, Odor, and Somatic Work: Sense-Making and Sensory Management." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 71(1): 53–71. Copyright © 2008.



*Waskul and Vannini's analysis of how we experience and respond to odors has broad implications. It illustrates how we do not react automatically to physical sensations but define and interpret them. We cannot do anything we please with either the external environment or our bodies, but we can interpret our perceptions of them in an infinite variety of ways. Our social experience is the source of those possible interpretations. It shapes our bodily sensations and experiences, including our experiences of pain, illness, excitement, and sexual pleasure, to name but a few. Physiological sensations, then, are only the raw materials out of which our bodily experiences are socially constructed.*

Few social norms are clearer than those which stipulate against foul odors (see Tuzin 2006). As Corbin (1986) has pointed out, rules against the excessive presence of odors have been strictly and invariantly enforced throughout successive historical waves of the sanitization movement. . . .

Indeed, olfactory somatic rules are largely legitimized by discourses of "health" and "cleanliness" (Largey and Watson 1972)—discourses that, among many things, equate cleanliness with godliness and that which is healthy and clean with a pleasant smell—a cultural motif frequently exploited by the advertising industry. For example, "laundry not only has to be clean, but it has to *smell* clean" (Synnott 1993: 193, emphasis in original).

As stated by Largey and Watson (1972: 1022), "particular odors, whether real or alleged, are sometimes used as indicants of the moral purity of particular individuals and groups within the social order, the consequences of which are indeed real." The bitter stench of stigma clearly reveals moral judgment (see Tuzin 2006). During the middle ages, it was believed that sorcerers and heretics could be detected by their foul odor (Summers 1956: 44). In medieval Europe, one of the most widely accepted theories of causes of the plague was the pathogenic odor of putrefaction (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994). Even Martin Luther agreed that contagion "poisoned the air or otherwise infected the poor

people by their breath and injected the moral poison into their bodies" (Norton 1975: 20). Just as "evil stinks" (Synnott 1993: 191), the aroma of sanctity is pleasing. In the book of Exodus (30:22–4), the Lord gave Moses a formula and instructions to create perfume. In the New Testament, Jesus was anointed with perfume from an alabaster vase—a treatment suitable for the most worldly great and, according to Matthew (26:6–13), much appreciated by at least this living deity.

The fundamentally public nature of odor partly explains why olfaction so directly intersects with morality and moral discourse. In direct opposition to the fundamentally private nature of taste (see Fine 1995), odor is shared by all within olfactory sensual proximity. For this reason Dewey (1887: 222) deemed taste the most "personal in the narrowest of sense" and smell more communal due to its "objective and universal" quality:

It must be noticed that the organic sensations and taste are personal in the narrowest of sense . . . a substance must be actually taken into the organism through the mouth before it can be tasted. Such feelings tend to divide one individual from another, for their enjoyment by one is either not shared with another, or is actually incompatible with such sharing. In smell, feeling becomes a whit more objective and universal. The odorous object, as a whole, is not dissolved in the organism. A number may get and enjoy similar feelings from one object.

In short, olfaction is a rich arena for sociological investigation, especially in terms of morality, because odor is fundamentally public and shared. Like dust (Fine and Hallett 2003: 12), odor "once recognized, becomes a cultural marker and is used to create social order . . . [olfaction] is not simply something that happens. It is something with which groups must deal. As groups deal with [odor], they reproduce the larger cultures in which they are embedded, they demonstrate processes of contention and control, and they negotiate meanings through similar processes that occur in larger units."



Because olfaction and odor are constructions of normative aesthetic and moral code, olfactory rules are enforced and odor is faithfully managed. The management of odor is common and widespread, observable in almost every body, everywhere. In Anglo-phone North America, odor is traditionally something to be eliminated or produced—on (and in) the body, the home, at work, automobiles, our communities—by use of air fresheners, deodorants, breath mints, fans, ventilation, air purification systems, and pollution laws. Even the mere mention of odors in conversation, especially body odors, is a delicate subject and it is not uncommon to find ourselves occasionally ignoring or denying the presence of uncontrollable, bad odors out of both a sense of tactfulness and taboo (cf. Zerubavel 2006). Adherence to the olfaction rules of moral odor/moral order represent more than the folkways of a culture and more than a matter of manners, politeness, and etiquette. As testified by recent “scent free” work and public space regulations, violations of olfaction rules are of potential legal concern and the production of inappropriate odor can be cause for civil litigation (although, given its gaseous consequences, one might wonder if the same logic might result in a bean prohibition—at least for human consumption, and possibly, our companion animals)...

### Methods and Data

We collected data through the use of research journals (Alaszewski 2006). We asked two cohorts of graduate students enrolled in an applied communication program at Royal Roads Western Canadian University to record their experiences with smell over a period of two weeks. We approached the students with an email explaining our interest in the role of non-verbal communication and solicited volunteers to participate. We did not promise extra credit or other incentives. Those who volunteered were provided with instructions and the research journal via email as an electronic file. We also invited the students to solicit the participation of acquaintances of theirs whom

they thought might be interested in the study. We guaranteed anonymity by creating a research email account, which participants could use to send us their completed journals in the form of email attachments. A total of twenty-three journals were completed, fifteen by women and eight by men. Ages ranged from twenty-four to fifty-nine, with a mean of almost thirty-eight years of age. The sample was ethnically diverse, including fifteen Caucasians, two East Indians, two East Asians, two South Americans, one Middle Easterner, and one African.

The journals contained questions that asked participants to describe their favorite and least favorite odors, to identify memories associated with odors, to document daily body-odor management efforts, to describe moments when during the course of daily life they became explicitly aware of smell, and to disclose and describe a situation in which they felt they smelled bad. In response to seven questions, respondents answered with as few as 181 words and as many as 1,303. Average response was just under 700 words (roughly two and one-half pages of double-spaced typed text).

Sensations of smell, like sensations of taste, are not easy to express (Fine 1995) and for this reason we felt that the use of the written word, and the reflective possibilities that writing provides, would help our research endeavors. Whereas the collection of data via the use of research journals offers the researcher no opportunity to observe interaction, it offers a wealth of reflective, thought-out, richly descriptive self-reported verbal data that allows the researcher to focus on the semiotic and linguistic components of olfactory experiences...

### Making Sense of Odors

Olfaction is commonly marked by what we call *somatic work*: a process whereby a somatic perception undergoes a reflexive interpretation. Such interpretation is marked by activities such as active reminiscing, forming chains of associations, evaluating, interpreting the significance of unique biographical particulars and/or social norms, and attributing



meanings. Thus somatic work yields evaluations that fall in line with interpersonal and/or normative expectations. Consider, for example, the somatic work that accounts for Kate's (age 29, ellipses in original) dislike of the smell of baby powder.

I despise the smell of baby powder. I went out with a guy who put it down his pants and to this day it makes me a bit sick. We went out for a couple of years and he was pretty tortured, negative, smoked too much pot, wanted to live in a cabin away from all people—he hated people for some reason. We had some kind of crazy chemistry and I did love him, but that part is hard to remember. He would wear jeans that were waaay [sic] too baggy, weighed down with a big belt, wallet chain, and smelling like baby powder mixed with pot and cigarettes. That is my strongest memory of him . . . maybe it was that the smell permeated the air of a relationship that was thoroughly bad for me. It makes me shudder when I think of it.

Kate's narrative displays what we refer to as the sense-making component of somatic work, a type of negotiating activity that constitutes work even in the absence of highly expressive language. For example, in the excerpt below Frank (age 45) described one of his favorite odors—vividly evaluating the sense that he makes of it—all of this without describing its essence. Frank explains, "One of my favorite smells is that of fresh baked bread. It reminds me of many things including my grandmother, my mother, my brother and I making numerous loaves to get ready for winter in Alberta. It has associated with it thoughts of a warm kitchen, important people in my life."

As Synnott (1993: 187) has argued, "odor, memory and meaning are . . . intimately linked and reach deep into our personal lives, all day, every day." . . . A *somatic career* is the historical dimension of somatic work: a living history of the somatic self and of the social organization of the labor of perception, as well as a received orientation to future somatic work. Somatic careers are built of habits of sensing.

### Habits of Sensing

Our data analysis shows that, rather than elaborating on the essential qualities of the odors themselves alone, participants were more likely to distinguish between enjoyable and disagreeable odors in terms of the habits of sensing that olfaction evokes. For example, Frank's sense-making reported above is informed by meaningful biographical resources—family memories that date back to his childhood in Alberta—which bear on his olfactory evaluation. These "involuntary memories" (cf. Proust 2001) are semiotic resources that inform his interpretation. We refer to these biographical resources as *habits of sensing*, i.e., sense-making patterns that express, articulate, and are the result of individual and collective sensorial biographies and histories.

By taking into account an individual or a group's somatic career, it is easy to understand the evaluative outcomes of perception. Consider, for example, Ashley's (age 48) account in the excerpt below; even the occasionally questionable smell of Lake Ontario (and lake water in general) gives rise to positive evaluations that are understandable by virtue of her reported nostalgic feelings.

[I enjoy of the smell of t]he shore of a fresh water lake! Because I grew up close to Lake Ontario (long enough ago that it smelled ok most days). I went down to the lake in all stages of my life. With my family as a young child, with my friends when we went off on our bikes, as a teenager for quiet, and as a young adult on runs and refuge . . . to look out over the water, listen and breathe. It all goes together under the smell.

Nostalgia shapes the meaning of odor by dwelling at the core of individual biography and "at the very heart of a generation's identity" (Davis 1979: 111). Nostalgia is a form of attachment to habits, in this case habits of perception, which play a powerful role in sense-making. As each of the following illustrate, nostalgia informs the interpretive act as a cluster of habits and perspectives, as a form of sentimental selective attention (James 1890; Mead 1938) toward certain characters of the



sensory fields—an attention “which answers both to [the perceiver’s] immediate sensitivities and to his [sic] experience” (Mead 1938: 7).

I remember a kid’s book called *Pat the Bunny* which has different textures for kids to touch; daddy’s rough beard (sandpaper), a shiny mirror, etc. At the end, you got to pat the bunny’s belly, which was soft cottony fur and has a very unique smell. I bought the book again several years ago when a friend had a baby and found that it still smells the same—a little bit like baby soap or something, but very distinct. It brings me right back to my childhood. I think it’s a combination of a nice, clean, fragrance combined with happy childhood memories (I loved that book and remember reading it with unidentifiable but very nice adults) that makes it so special (Kate, 29).

One of the most pleasurable odors I recall is from my childhood—it was during the fall in Edmonton when my parents would make mustard pickle. This would take an entire weekend and involved the chopping and cutting of cauliflower, peppers, onions, etc. and the very strong scent of vinegar and mustard would take over our house. It was a happy memory of my parents together in the kitchen, engaging in a ritualistic activity as the coziness of fall and autumn surrounded us (Rose, 39).

... “Habits are acquired” functions—wrote Dewey (1922: 14)—which manifest “skill of sensory and motor organs, cunning or craft, and objective materials. They assimilate objective energies, and eventuate in command of environment” (Dewey 1922: 15). Habits are not synonymous with sensing, yet for Dewey (1922: 32) it is “habitual attitudes which govern concrete sensory materials.” Thus we intend our concept of habits of sensing as “filters [of] all the material that reaches our perception and thought.” It is precisely these habits of sensing that account for Peter’s (age 57) attachment to the scent of face powder; his habituation with the fragrance his grandmother used to exude and as wistful disposition toward earlier times.

My mother’s mother, my Nana, used a face powder. She was a poor widow-lady so her choice of product was probably the cheapest available in Moncton, New Brunswick in the 1950s. But it was her smell. Throughout my life I’ve had fleeting sniffs, usually of old ladies, that take me back like Proust’s Madeleine, to being 5 years old and meeting my Nana at the bus station after her shift at the airplane engine factory (she was a “Rosie the Riveter” who wasn’t laid off after WW2). Her unfailing gift of a stick of Juicy Fruit gum was the highlight of my day. It was pure unadulterated pleasure to be hugged and kissed by my powdery Nana.

As we have illustrated, participants told of nostalgic feelings for moments in time—they also expressed nostalgic feelings for special places, which are often informed by feelings of “displacement” or the “involuntary disruption of place attachment” (Milligan 2003: 381). As Milligan argued, displacement from a beloved place is marked by discontinuity in one’s biographical identity and in this fashion “nostalgia provides one way of maintaining or regaining identity continuity” (380). Examples of this relation have been noted by researchers of smell (e.g. Hirsch 2006) and also abound in our data. For example, Susan (age 25, ellipses in original) identifies her liking of the smell of Coppertone sun block lotion with vacationing in Spain:

This is such a funny thing to have as a favorite smell, but I just love it. I used to say that if I could find it in a perfume I would wear it everyday! When I was little, my family used to go to Spain for vacations. Every year we would pack up and ship out for three weeks. This was the only time when I actually saw my father, as he was often away half the year traveling for work (and the other half he spent at the office) so I associate a sense of wellbeing and peace with that smell. It was great to be so carefree—no school, no chores . . . nothing to do but swim and run around in the sun! I smell it sometimes on other people, usually in the summer, and I get immediately transported to the beach. I feel warm, I can hear the waves . . . it’s quite the experience!



Similarly, Allison (age 32) is delighted by the smell of jasmine because it evokes blissful memories of her experiences in Thailand:

The most pleasurable odor I recall is the smell of jasmine flowers opening on a warm evening. On a trip back to Bangkok from Changmai, Thailand I remember sitting on the train car surrounded by my backpack and all my personal possessions. I had spent the morning at the market shopping for food items for a Thai cooking class that I was taking. My instructor bought each of her students a necklace of jasmine flowers at the market that were tightly closed. It wasn't until the warmth of the day had taken effect and the flowers began to open on the evening train trip that I noticed that I still had the necklace on. The smell was wonderfully sweet and musty and encompassed all the good things I had experienced in Thailand. I rarely smell the same smell anymore but when I do it reminds me of my independence traveling alone in foreign lands and the beauty of Thailand.

On the other hand, even an odor generally deemed pleasant or neutral can be interpreted as noxious when linked to negative memories. Consider, for example, Beth's (age 31) "gag reflex" at the smell of the fabric stain-remover Spray and Wash:

Right now I would say [I dislike the smell of] Spray and Wash because I recently had a very bad and sickly night that involved imbibing large quantities of red wine. By "accident," I spilled a glass of red wine on the white carpet in the office of my parent's house. They were away on vacation at the time and so I drunkenly panicked [and] tried my best to clean it up. I didn't know where they kept their carpet cleaner, so instead I used Spray and Wash, the stain remover for clothing. I used half the bottle on the stain. I reasoned at the time that more was better and the more it soaked into the carpet the more the stain would magically disappear. To make a long story short, my brain has linked the two smells (red wine & Spray and Wash), and my sickly drunken state together to create an instant gag reflex at the smell of Spray and Wash.

Beth's evaluation of Spray and Wash has nothing to do with the essential qualities of the odor itself—it can only be understood in light of her unique somatic career, that is, in light of a sensorial reservoir of "memories that contains versatile, resourceful interpretive models and cultural schemes" (Rapoport, Lomsky-Feder, and Heider 2002: 176). This is not to suggest that all odors are associated with biographical particulars or that odors' essential qualities are inconsequential. Rather, we suggest that perceptions associated with "symbolic images and allusions from the past . . . by virtue of their resource in a particular person's biography tend to be more idiosyncratic, individualized, and particularistic in their reference" (Davis 1979: 222) and thus tend to matter greatly within individual acts of perception. Habits shape sense-making by functioning as interpretive resources rooted in past sensation and conduct, but at the same time in the very course of their operation in the process of perception habits have the potential of adding "new qualities and rearrang[ing] what is received" (Dewey 1922: 32). This aspect of the process is magnified in the case of *somatic escalation*, the second component of somatic career. . . .

### Somatic Rules and Somatic Escalation

Ashley's (age 48) statement:

I think smell immediately communicates to guests if a home is hygienic, or well cared for, and consequently, if the family cares well for itself. Civilized I suppose. Status. A foul smelling home is totally low class—same with an individual. The consequences of not paying attention to odors in the home could be hygienic/illness and stigma.

For Ashley certain odors "immediately" connote hygiene (or lack thereof). Hygiene is associated with care for the self and others, class, status, health, and civilization. Ashley is not alone in these sentiments. For example, linking bad smell of her children with the code of motherly labor of love, Karla (age 32) writes, "[My least favorite smell is] the smell of my children when I tuck them in at



night and they should have had a bath—the way their hair smells—it makes me feel as though I have neglected my motherly duties.” Ashley (age 48) echoes Karla’s sentiments by linking the odor of feces with a call to motherly duty to keep up with hygienic control of the house and children:

[My least favorite is the smell of] poo. For a while there my daughter was in diapers, I had two cats with their litter tray, and was house training a very large (45 lb) puppy. I got terribly tired of looking after their potty habits! It was also worrisome that if things got the slightest bit ahead of me, the house would smell, or my daughter might get some on her hands. Hygiene and self-respect go together.

Perception is often associated with cultural values (Fine 1995; Zerubavel 1997). As Fine (1995: 246) writes, “sensory judgments are grounded in social relationships, face-to-face negotiations, social structures, and organizations.” These are value judgments that have seemingly “immediate” and potent somatic significance: odor is perceived, with great ease, as essentially bad, foul, ill, thus conflating what emanates a particular odor with how that object smells. It is, indeed, *common sense*—an expression that refers to a widely shared way of making sense of sensory perceptions—to suggest that a certain olfactory condition has seemingly “natural” or “essential” qualities which make it good or bad or even uncivilized, sick, and low in social status. Yet—regardless of the prevailing beliefs that these immediate associations are “natural”—they are inevitably learned (Herz 2006), and thus cultural, even ideological. Thus are the conditions of *somatic escalation*—conditions in which the denotation and connotation of an odor are blurred into one immediate “common-sense perception,” so that an odor immediately and simultaneously both denotes and connotes an abstract evaluative concept (like civilized hygiene or status). . . .

A somatic escalation is, in sum, a process of naturalization: of turning multiple abstract interpretations, deeply entrenched within a culture and highly idiosyncratic, into an illusion that

perception is natural and free of interpretive work; into an illusion that the object and the sense that is made of it are immediate, “commonsense,” identical, and transparent. As Volosinov (1973: 105) has rightly pointed out, “meaning is molded by evaluation . . . meaning is always permeated with value judgment.”

The fact that some odors are judged offensive and others are deemed pleasing clearly implies a system of order that is bound by somatic rules that are normatively aesthetic and moral. Borrowing from Douglas (1970: 48), we suggest that disagreeable odors are those that offend against order; they are “the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.” Offensive odors are those that deviate from olfactory somatic rules. Somatic escalation functions on the basis of somatic rules for sense-making. Somatic rules are contextual and diverse; their application is consistent but variable. Our data show the functioning of basic olfactory somatic rules disciplining somatic work in relation to variables such as the intensity of odor, its context, and its moral/aesthetic character.

The olfaction order of prevailing somatic rules entails a negotiated structure of intensity. Odor is sometimes perceived as too pungent or perhaps not fragrant enough. Several participants in this study wrote about the desire to be aromatic—but also expressed concerns about overpowering scent. Nichole (age 40) wrote: “I like to wear a fragrance that is appealing, yet not overpowering.” Kate (age 29) recalls her near *faux pas*—a close rush with olfactory intensity deviance—how a friend reminded her of the applicable somatic rule, and her prompt conformity: “I tried some perfume (from a sample my sister-in-law gave me) this evening before going out for dinner with a friend. She said it was too strong, so I washed it off.” More than just a personal preference, for some participants in this study, olfactory somatic rules of intensity are regulated and enforced by contemporary “fragrance free” mandates that demand olfactory political correctness.



In my field of work, and generally in public service, there has been a push toward scent free environments. So, aftershaves, cologne, and perfumes are not politically correct. There also seems to be a higher prevalence of environmental allergies. Those allergies can be debilitating. Finding a good deodorant without a scent is difficult. (Frank, 45).

Olfaction order also concerns a negotiated structure of contexts: we are more or less sensitive to odor depending on whether we perceive the aroma as appropriate to the context. As Michelle (age 30) suggests, the smell of garlic may be appealing in a Caesar salad but, once consumed, the same aroma evoked a very different response in her friend's car:

There was a day (way back when) that I went to Earl's for lunch and had a Caesar salad. I was probably 17 or 18 years old. I enjoyed the salad at the time. It wasn't until I sat in an enclosed space (my friend's car) that I noticed that the smell of garlic was radiating from my pores. The garlic smell was even more apparent to me when my friend commented. I felt awful. We both agreed that stopping to get some gum or mints was a very good idea.

Even a normally disagreeable odor might be deemed pleasing when appropriately contextualized. Unpleasant odors can be made tolerable if the circumstances are appropriate. For example, Ashley (age 48) admits to enjoying the smell of her dog—"even though he smells rather awful"—and explains, "[I enjoy the smell of m]y dog when we cuddle. Frankly even though he smells rather awful, the scent is associated with our 'friendship.' It smells like home, and oddly enough, peace."

Finally, olfaction order is also structured by somatic rules regarding assessments of moral/aesthetic character. As previously suggested, many odors are immediately evaluated as positive or negative, good or bad, and these evaluations are not neutral: what smells good is good, what smells bad is bad (Herz 2006; Synnott 1993). For example, Jackie (age 36) wrote, "It is important to control or manipulate odor on your body when you will be in social situations so that you are not judged based

on poor body odor. Strong or bad body odor could be taken as a sign of being unclean or sloppy."

Among the most morally and aesthetically offensive are odors that originate in the body, odiously upset public space, and assault the olfaction of others. As Simmel suggests, "that we can smell the atmosphere of somebody is the most intimate perception of him [or her]"—and some atmospheres are apparently too intimate, obliging "a selection and a taking of distance" (1907: 658). Particularly offensive is the moral and aesthetic character of odors that originate and waft from either end of the digestive system: halitosis, vomit, flatulence, urine, and feces. There is a cultural expectation as to what belongs inside and outside the body and odors that violate these expectations are considered polluting or contaminating (Turner 2003; Weinberg and Williams 2005). Thus, for example, participants in this study were commonly concerned about bad breath. Kate (29) said, "I'm always slightly paranoid about having bad breath. If I don't have gum or haven't just brushed my teeth, I'm careful not to get too close to whomever I'm talking to, and assume that any reaction/blink is them flinching at my halitosis." Because fecal products are regarded as a "universal disgust substance" (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 1993: 579), several participants in this study suggest flatulence and the smell of feces especially contaminate moral and aesthetic character:

As part of the long term effects of a broken back and fractured pelvis, my bowel functions can sometimes be impacted . . . literally! This can lead to flatulence. I find it most embarrassing to be at a work meeting or in a small event and to be experiencing this social challenge. (Frank, 45 ellipses in original)

Allowing one's fecal smells to escape and assault the olfaction of others "suggests a momentary loss of control" (Goffman 1963: 69, also see Weinberg and Williams 2005). This kind of control—and guarding against its loss—clearly implicates the expressive and impressive dimensions of olfactory impression



management. In short, somatic rules of intensity, context, and moral/aesthetic character intersect with the normative dramaturgies of everyday life and rituals of face-work (Goffman 1967). "Aesthetic order"—as Fine (1995: 266) has elegantly and succinctly put—is "a domain of social order." . . .

### Conclusions

"That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet"—or so muses Juliet in Shakespeare's famous tragedy (Act II, Scene 2). However, notwithstanding romance—in fact, quite to the contrary—our analysis suggests olfactory perception is not so simple. Olfactory perception hinges on active sense-making. Odor is made meaningful through denotative and connotative indexes, active reminiscing, the formulation of chains of associations, evaluation, interpretation, the significance of unique biographical particulars, the social norms of olfactory communities, and the indexical properties and qualities of odors themselves. Through smell, meaning is reflexively bestowed unto odor in the context of negotiated somatic rules. For this reason, odor is a "sign vehicle" (Goffman 1959) we thus manipulate and manage on bodies and in environments in an effort to convey desired impressions. Clearly, odor is a subtle but significant component of the culturally normative and aesthetic rituals of expressive and impressive everyday life.

"Smell is powerful" and yet, for the most part, "we breathe in the aromas which surround us without being consciously aware of their importance to us" (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994: 1). Perhaps that explains the power of odor: olfactory perception seems so "natural," so unmitigated, such a raw, basic, and fundamental animal function. But this study suggests otherwise; the human animal defies such simplicities. We have empirically illustrated what Classen, Howes, and Synnott (1994: 3, emphasis in original) conceptually argue—"smell is *cultural*." Yet, without pushing our social constructionist ontology too far, we have highlighted how odors themselves are signs: indexes carrying unique odoriferous qualities, a true potential for

meaning. The physiological nature of odors is, in fact, the raw material of which olfactory perception is fashioned—and that fashioning is quintessentially cultural and natural at the same time. An object's meanings, including sensory perceptions, reside not in the object itself alone but in the interaction or transaction of conduct directed toward it and the qualities emanating from it (Dewey 1934; Mead 1938; also see Halton 2004). In short, it is through forms of somatic work that sensory meaning is made. Indeed, as we suggested from the very beginning, people sense as well as make sense. Goffman (1967: 44–5, emphasis added) provocatively suggests that:

If persons have a universal human nature, they themselves are not to be looked to for an explanation of it. One must look rather to the fact that societies everywhere, if they are to be societies, must mobilize their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters. One way of mobilizing the individual for this purpose is through ritual; *he is taught to be perceptive*. . . . It is these elements that are referred to in part when one speaks of universal human nature. Universal human nature is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without.

The same may be said of the "common sense" of sense-making—olfactory or otherwise. Part of the seemingly universal "nature" of olfaction precisely owes to the fact that it is made "common sense" through ritual.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is somatic work? What are some "habits of sensing"? How does smelling a particular scent translate into nostalgia or moral judgments about people?
2. What does it mean to argue that "smell is cultural"? What somatic rules and other social factors influence the somatic order? For two days, keep your own



smell and sound journal. What smells and sounds catch your attention and what images, memories, evaluations, and emotions do they evoke? Which smells and sounds do you find most offensive and which do you find most pleasing? Which sensations denote high or low status? What rituals and somatic rules have influenced your ordering of somatic experiences this way? How do you manage your own smells in response to your habits of sensing?

3. Marketers and consumer consultants are often quite sociologically mindful about smells, sounds, and other sensory experiences. They know that certain music playlists, for example, compel consumers to stay longer in stores, browse, and spend more. Pay attention to the music playing in various businesses and offices you enter. What music is playing at the grocery store? The gym? The doctor's office? While you are on hold? What interpretations and behaviors do these various playlists evoke in you? Why? Why does music often fade into the background in these settings?

4. Pain is a somatic experience that individuals experience and treat to various degrees. Because of this variability in "tolerance" to pain, medical personnel use subjective pain scales to assess individuals' pain level and determine appropriate treatment. (For instance, on a scale of 1 to 10, how bad is the pain? Ten is excruciating and intolerable.) But if somatic experiences are culturally inscribed, pain tolerance is socially ordered. Consider the case of childbirth, about which cultural depictions of pain abound. In the United States, where nearly all women give birth in hospitals, where do women learn what labor will feel like and how to manage pain? What common narratives address pain in childbirth? How is pain depicted in widely released Hollywood films? How do these cultural depictions affect women's interpretations of pain and pain management? How does pain management differ in other cultures? Why? Consider the same series of questions about managing pain inflicted by sports injuries.



## Emotion Work and Feeling Rules

ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD

*Many people believe that their "true" self speaks through their emotions—emotions that are immune to social influence. Yet, many of these same people go to parties to feel good, enroll in anger management classes, and seek therapy for phobias. They implicitly recognize that feelings are more pliable than they would like to admit. There may be something innate to human emotions, but they are far from fixed. Human emotions seem to vary as much as the languages that humans speak.*

*For many years, students of social life ignored emotions. That changed in the late 1970s. A number of sociologists began to study and write about the social shaping and consequences of human emotionality. Arlie Russell Hochschild was one of the first to explore the subject. This selection outlines her influential approach to the sociological study and understanding of emotions.*

*Hochschild was admittedly not the first to recognize that emotions are subject to social regulation. She credits Erving Goffman for doing so but criticizes him for limiting attention to outward expressions of emotion. Hochschild notes that individuals attempt not only to express but also to feel what they think they should be feeling. This "emotion work" involves more than the mere surface acting of emotional expression. It also involves the deep acting of suppressing and evoking the very feelings from which emotional expression flows.*

*As Hochschild observes, both individuals' surface acting and deep acting of emotions are guided by "feeling rules." Although these rules are written nowhere and are seldom explicitly articulated, individuals subtly remind one another of them in a variety of ways. They inform one another of what they should, should not, and "must" be feeling. Normal feelings are socially normative feelings, and individuals work on their emotions to feel normal. Thus, variations in normal human emotions are products of variations in the feeling rules among human social groups. It is not so much the true self but social experience that speaks through our emotions.*

Why is the emotive experience of normal adults in daily life as orderly as it is? Why, generally speaking, do people feel gay at parties, sad at funerals, happy at weddings? This question leads us to examine, not conventions of appearance or outward comportment, but conventions of feeling. Conventions of feeling become surprising only when we imagine, by contrast, what totally unpatterned, unpredictable emotive life might actually be like at parties, funerals, weddings, and in the family or work life of normal adults.

Erving Goffman (1961) suggests both the surprise to be explained and part of the explanation:

... We find that participants will hold in check certain psychological states and attitudes, for after

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all, the very general rule that one enter into the prevailing mood in the encounter carries the understanding that contradictory feelings will be in abeyance. . . . So generally, in fact, does one suppress unsuitable affect, that we need to look at offenses to this rule to be reminded of its usual operation. (Goffman 1961: 23)

If we take this passage seriously, as I urge we do, we may be led back to the classic question of social order from a particular vantage point—that of emotion management. From this vantage point, rules seem to govern how people try or try not to feel in ways “appropriate to the situation.” Such a notion suggests how profoundly the individual is “social,” and “socialized” to try to pay tribute to official definitions of situations, with no less than their feelings. . . .

### The Interactive Account of Emotion and Social Psychology

If emotions and feelings can to some degree be managed, how might we get a conceptual grasp of the managing act from a social perspective? The interactive account of emotion leads us into a conceptual arena “between” the Goffmanian focus on consciously designed appearances on the one hand and the Freudian focus on unconscious intrapsychic events on the other. . . .

Goffman guides our attention to social patterns in emotive experience. He catches an irony: moment to moment, the individual is actively negotiating a course of action, but in the long run, all the action seems like passive acquiescence to social convention. The conserving of convention is not a passive business. Goffman’s approach might simply be extended and deepened by showing that people not only try to conform outwardly but do so inwardly as well. “When they issue uniforms, they issue skins” (Goffman 1974) could be extended: “and two inches of flesh.”

Goffman’s actors actively manage outer impressions, but they do not actively manage inner feelings. For example, a typical Goffmanian actor,

Preedy at the beach (Goffman 1959), is exquisitely attuned to outward appearance, but his glances inward at subjective feeling are fleeting and blurred. The very topic, sociology of emotion, presupposes a human capacity for, if not the actual habit of, reflecting on and shaping inner feelings, a habit itself distributed variously across time, age, class, and locale. This variation would drop from sight were we to adopt an exclusive focus on the actor’s attentiveness to behavioral facade and assume a uniform passivity vis-à-vis feelings.

This skew in the theoretical actor is related to what from my viewpoint is another problem: Goffman’s concept of acting. Goffman suggests that we spend a good deal of effort managing impressions—that is, acting. He posits only *one* sort of acting—the direct management of behavioral expression. His illustrations, though, actually point to two types of acting—the direct management of behavioral expression (e.g., the given-off sigh, the shoulder shrug), and the management of feeling from which expression can follow (e.g., the thought of some hopeless project). An actor playing the part of King Lear might go about his task in two ways. One actor, following the English school of acting, might focus on outward demeanor, the constellation of minute expressions that correspond to Lear’s sense of fear and impotent outrage. This is the sort of acting Goffman theorizes about. Another actor, adhering to the American or Stanislavsky school of acting, might guide his memories and feelings in such a way as to elicit the corresponding expressions. The first technique we might call “surface acting,” the second “deep acting.” Goffman fails to distinguish the first from the second, and he obscures the importance of “deep acting.” Obscuring this, we are left with the impression that social factors pervade only the “social skin,” the tried-for outer appearances of the individual. We are left underestimating the power of the social. . . .

Freud, of course, dealt with emotions, but for him they were always secondary to drive. He proposed a general theory of sexual and aggressive



drives. Anxiety, as a derivative of aggressive and sexual drives, was of paramount importance, while a wide range of other emotions, including joy, jealousy, and depression, were given relatively little attention. He developed, and many others have since elaborated, the concept of ego defenses as generally unconscious, involuntary means of avoiding painful or unpleasant affect. Finally the notion of "inappropriate affect" is used to point to aspects of the individual's ego functioning and not used to point to the social rules according to which a feeling is or is not deemed appropriate to a situation.

The emotion-management perspective is indebted to Freud for the general notion of what resources individuals of different sorts possess for accomplishing the task of emotion work (as I have defined it) and for the notion of unconscious involuntary emotion management. The emotion-management perspective differs from the Freudian model in its focus on the full range of emotions and feelings and its focus on conscious and deliberate efforts to shape feeling. From this perspective, we note too that "inappropriate emotion" has a clearly important social as well as intrapsychic side. . . .

In sum, the emotion-management perspective fosters attention to how people try to feel, not, as for Goffman, how people try to appear and to feel. It leads us to attend to how people consciously feel and not, as for Freud, how people feel unconsciously. The interactive account of emotion points to alternate theoretical junctures—between consciousness of feeling and consciousness of feeling rules, [and] between feeling rules and emotion work. . . . In the remainder of this essay, it is these junctures we shall explore.

### Emotion Work

By "emotion work," I refer to the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling. To "work on" an emotion or feeling is, for our purposes, the same as "to manage" an emotion or to do "deep acting." Note that "emotion work" refers to the effort—the act of trying—and not to the outcome, which may or may not be successful.

Failed acts of management still indicate what ideal formulations guide the effort, and on that account are no less interesting than emotion management that works.

The very notion of an attempt suggests an active stance vis-à-vis feeling. In my exploratory study, respondents characterized their emotion work by a variety of active verb forms: "I *psyched myself up* . . . I *squashed* my anger down . . . I *tried hard* not to feel disappointed . . . I *made* myself have a good time . . . I tried to feel grateful . . . I *killed* the hope I had burning." There was also the actively passive form, as in: "I *let myself* finally feel sad."

Emotion work differs from emotion "control" or "suppression." The latter two terms suggest an effort merely to stifle or prevent feeling. "Emotion work" refers more broadly to the act of evoking or shaping, as well as suppressing, feeling in oneself. I avoid the term "manipulate" because it suggests a shallowness I do not mean to imply. We can speak, then, of two broad types of emotion work: *evocation*, in which the cognitive focus is on a desired feeling which is initially absent, and *suppression*, in which the cognitive focus is on an undesired feeling which is initially present. One respondent, going out with a priest 20 years her senior, exemplifies the problems of evocative emotion work:

Anyway, I started to try and make myself like him. I made myself focus on the way he talked, certain things he'd done in the past. . . . When I was with him, I did like him but I would go home and write in my journal how much I couldn't stand him. I kept changing my feeling and actually thought I really liked him while I was with him, but a couple of hours after he was gone, I reverted back to different feelings. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Another respondent exemplifies the work, not of working feeling up, but of working feeling down:

Last summer I was going with a guy often, and I began to feel very strongly about him. I knew though, that he had just broken up with a girl a year ago because she had gotten too serious about him, so I was afraid to show any emotion. I also



was afraid of being hurt, so I attempted to change my feelings. *I talked myself into not caring about Mike . . . but I must admit it didn't work for long. To sustain this feeling I had to almost invent bad things about him and concentrate on them or continue to tell myself he didn't care. It was a hardening of emotions, I'd say. It took a lot of work and was unpleasant, because I had to concentrate on anything I could find that was irritating about him.*

Often emotion work is aided by setting up an emotion-work system, for example, telling friends of all the worst faults of the person one wanted to fall out of love with, and then going to those friends for reinforcement of this view of the ex-beloved. This suggests another point: emotion work can be done by the self upon the self, by the self upon others, and by others upon oneself.

In each case the individual is conscious of a moment of "pinch," or discrepancy, between what one does feel and what one wants to feel (which is, in turn, affected by what one thinks one ought to feel in such a situation). In response, the individual may try to eliminate the pinch by working on feeling. Both the sense of discrepancy and the response to it can vary in time. The managing act, for example, can be a five-minute stopgap measure, or it can be a more long-range gradual effort suggested by the term "working through."

There are various techniques of emotion work. One is cognitive: the attempt to change images, ideas, or thoughts in the service of changing the feelings associated with them. A second is *bodily*, the attempt to change somatic or other physical symptoms of emotion (e.g., trying to breathe slower, trying not to shake). Third, there is *expressive* emotion work: trying to change expressive gestures in the service of changing inner feeling (e.g., trying to smile or to cry). This differs from simple display in that it is directed toward change in feeling. It differs from bodily emotion work in that the individual tries to alter or shape one or another of the classic public channels for the expression of feeling.

These three techniques are distinct theoretically, but they often, of course, go together in practice. For example:

I was a star halfback in high school. Before games I didn't feel the upsurge of adrenalin—in a word I wasn't "psyched up." (This was due to emotional difficulties I was experiencing and still experience—I was also an A student whose grades were dropping.) Having been in the past a fanatical, emotional, intense player, a "hitter" recognized by coaches as a very hard worker and a player with "desire," this was very upsetting. I tried to look nervous and intense before games, so at least the coaches wouldn't catch on. . . . When actually I was mostly bored, or in any event, not "up," I recall before one game wishing I was in the stands watching my cousin play for his school, rather than "out here."

Emotion work becomes an object of awareness most often, perhaps, when the individual's feelings do not fit the situation, that is, when the latter does not account for or legitimate feelings in the situation. A situation (such as a funeral) often carries with it a proper definition of itself ("this is a time of facing loss"). This official frame carries with it a sense of what it is fitting to feel (sadness). It is when this tripartite consistency among situation, conventional frame, and feeling is somehow ruptured, as when the bereaved feels an irrepressible desire to laugh delightedly at the thought of an inheritance, that rule and management come into focus. It is then that the more normal flow of deep convention—the more normal fusion of situation, frame, and feeling—seems like an accomplishment.

The smoothly warm airline hostess, the ever-cheerful secretary, the unirkitated complaint clerk, the undisgusted proctologist, the teacher who likes every student equally, and Goffman's unflappable poker player may all have to engage in deep acting, an acting that goes well beyond the mere ordering of display. Work to make feeling and frame consistent with situation is work in which individuals continually and privately engage. But they do so



in obeisance to rules not completely of their own making.

### Feeling Rules

We feel. We try to feel. We want to try to feel. The social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel may be describable as a set of socially shared, albeit often latent (not thought about unless probed at), rules. In what way, we may ask, are these rules themselves known and how are they developed?

To begin with, let us consider several common forms of evidence for feeling rules. In common parlance, we often talk about our feelings or those of others as if rights and duties applied directly to them. For example, we often speak of "having the right" to feel angry at someone. Or we say we "should feel more grateful" to a benefactor. We chide ourselves that a friend's misfortune or a relative's death "should have hit us harder" or that another's good luck or our own should have inspired more joy. We know feeling rules, too, from how others react to what they infer from our emotive display. Another may say to us, "You *shouldn't* feel so guilty; it wasn't your fault," or "You *don't* have a right to feel jealous, given our agreement." Another may simply declare an opinion as to the fit of feeling to situation or may cast a claim upon our managerial stance, presupposing this opinion. Others may question or call for an account of a particular feeling in a situation, whereas they do not ask for an accounting of some other situated feeling (Lyman and Scott 1970). Claims and callings for an account can be seen as *rule reminders*. At other times, a person may, in addition, chide, tease, cajole, scold, shun—in a word, sanction us for "misfeeling." Such sanctions are a clue to the rules they are meant to enforce.

Rights and duties set out the properties as to the *extent* (one can feel "too angry" or "not angry enough"), the *direction* (one can feel sad when one should feel happy), and the *duration* of a feeling, given the situation against which it is set. These rights and duties of feeling are a clue to the

depth of social convention, to one final reach of social control.

There is a distinction, in theory at least, between a feeling rule as it is known by our sense of what we can *expect* to feel in a given situation, and a rule as it is known by our sense of what we *should* feel in that situation. For example, one may realistically expect (knowing oneself and one's neighbor's parties) to feel bored at a large New Year's Eve party and at the same time acknowledge that it would be more fitting to feel exuberant. However, "expect to feel" and "should ideally feel" often coincide, as below:

Marriage, chaos, unreal, completely different in many ways than I imagined. Unfortunately, we rehearsed the morning of our wedding at eight o'clock. The wedding was to be at eleven o'clock. It wasn't like I thought (everyone would know what to do). They didn't. That made me nervous. My sister didn't help me get dressed or flatter me (nor did anyone in the dressing room until I asked them). I was depressed. I wanted to be so happy on our wedding day. I never dreamed how anyone would cry at their wedding. A wedding is "the happy day" of one's life. I couldn't believe that some of my best friends couldn't make it to my wedding and that added to a lot of little things. So I started to the church and all these things that I always thought would not happen at my wedding went through my mind. I broke down—I cried going down. "Be happy," I told myself. Think of the friends and relatives that are present. (But I finally said to myself, "Hey, people aren't getting married, you are. It's for Rich [my husband] and you.") From down the pretty long aisle we looked at each other's eyes. His love for me changed my whole being. From that point on we joined arms. I was relieved and the tension was gone. In one sense it meant misery—but in the true sense of two people in love and wanting to share life—it meant the world to me. It was beautiful. It was indescribable.<sup>1</sup>

In any given situation, we often invest what we expect to feel with idealization. To a remarkable



extent these idealizations vary socially. If the "old-fashioned bride" above anticipates a "right" to feel jealous at any possible future infidelity, the young "flower child" below rejects just this right.

. . . [W]hen I was living down south, I was involved with a group of people, friends. We used to spend most evenings after work or school together. We used to do a lot of drugs, acid, coke, or just smoke dope and we had this philosophy that we were very communal and did our best to share everything—clothes, money, food, and so on. I was involved with this one man—and thought I was "in love" with him. He in turn had told me that I was very important to him. Anyway, this one woman who was a very good friend of mine at one time and this man started having a sexual relationship, supposedly without my knowledge. I knew though and had a lot of mixed feelings about it. I thought, intellectually, that I had no claim to the man and believed in fact that no one should ever try to *own* another person. I believed also that it was none of my business and I had no reason to worry about their relationship together, for it had nothing really to do with my friendship with either of them. I also believed in sharing. But I was horribly hurt, alone and lonely, depressed, and I couldn't shake the depression and on top of those feelings I felt guilty for having those possessively jealous feelings. And so I would continue going out with these people every night, and try to suppress my feelings. My ego was shattered. I got to the point where I couldn't even laugh around them. So finally I confronted my friends and left for the summer and traveled with a new friend. I realized later what a heavy situation it was, and it took me a long time to get myself together and feel whole again.

Whether the convention calls for trying joyfully to possess or trying casually not to, the individual compares and measures experience against an expectation often idealized. It is left for motivation ("what I want to feel") to mediate between

feeling rule ("what I should feel") and emotion work ("what I try to feel"). Some of the time many of us can live with a certain dissonance between "ought" and "want," or between "want" and "try to." But the attempts to reduce emotive dissonance are our periodic clues to rules of feeling.

A feeling rule shares some formal properties with other sorts of rules, such as rules of etiquette, rules of bodily comportment, and those of social interaction in general (Goffman 1961). A feeling rule is like these other kinds of rules in the following ways: it delineates a zone within which one has permission to be free of worry, guilt, or shame with regard to the situated feeling. Such zoning ordinances describe a metaphoric floor and ceiling, there being room for motion and play between the two. Like other rules, feeling rules can be obeyed halfheartedly or boldly broken, the latter at varying costs. A feeling rule can be in varying proportions external or internal. Feeling rules differ curiously from other types of rules, in that they do not apply to action but to what is often taken as a precursor to action. Therefore, they tend to be latent and resistant to formal codification.

Feeling rules reflect patterns of social membership. Some rules may be nearly universal, such as the rule that one should not enjoy killing or witnessing the killing of a human being, including oneself. Other rules are unique to particular social groups and can be used to distinguish among them as alternate governments or colonizers of individual internal events.

### Conclusion

Social psychology has suffered under the tacit assumption that emotion, because it seems unbidden and uncontrollable, is not governed by social rules. Social rules, for their part, are seen as applying to behavior and thought, but rarely to emotion or feeling. If we reconsider the nature of emotion and the nature of our capacity to try shaping it, we are struck by the imperial scope of social rules.



**Note**

1. The illustrations of emotion work come from a content analysis of 261 protocols given to students in two classes at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1974. Many of the illustrations come from answers to the question, "Describe as fully and concretely as possible a real situation important to you, in which you experienced either changing a real situation to fit your feelings or changing your feelings to fit a situation. What did it mean to you?"

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**Reflective Questions**

1. Sociological psychologists think of emotions as the feeling-based experiences of others and ourselves, which we shape and manage. What does emotion work look like? What is the difference between "surface acting" and "deep acting"? Which one of these forms of emotion work do you engage in more often?

2. What dimensions of emotional experience do feeling rules address? Where do we learn feeling rules from? How do people manage their internal feelings when they do not appropriately fit an occasion (e.g., when they feel relief or joy at a funeral or anger at a birth)? What happens when their external display of feelings does not fit the feeling rules? How do others react?
3. Waiting tables, clerking at a grocery store, selling insurance, and nursing are examples of interactive service work where employers create feeling rules for how employees should manage emotions at work. Companies may even create handbooks and train their employees in how to transform a restaurant to feel like "home" for patrons or stir feelings of fear or desperation in order to spark a sale. Many provide employees with feeling scripts that tell them to smile, be cheerful, and accommodate customers' demands. Perhaps you have worked in a workplace that dictates feeling rules. What effects do employer-prescribed feeling rules have on workers and their emotional lives? What workplace conditions lead to feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment among employees? What conditions promote feelings of burnout or inauthenticity?
4. We often approach others with the expectation that they manage emotions in their interactions with us, both to make us feel a particular way or to repress or stir particular emotions in themselves for our sake. How are our expectations shaped by gender, race, ability level, age, and social class?



## Closure Talk

NANCY S. BERNIS

*Individuals may manage their emotions in terms of socially relative feeling rules, but just how much social experience shapes their feelings is a matter of continuing controversy. There are reasons to suspect that people everywhere express anger, fear, happiness, and sadness similarly and may even experience these emotions for common, although not identical, reasons. Likewise, different groups have widely differing mourning customs, but virtually everyone everywhere grieves over the death of a loved one. The question remains: Just how universal and how historically and culturally variable are human emotions?*

Guided by a social constructionist perspective, Nancy Bernis addresses that question when examining the emergence of "closure" as an emotional need contemporary Americans experience when grappling with grief and trauma. As she notes, many analysts and organizations argue that the need for closure is a natural human reaction to painful loss and grief, especially when a loved one dies. These analysts and organizations suggest that a deeply felt yearning for closure is determined by human nature and not by social experience. Unconvinced by these claims, Bernis describes how and why closure is a socially created reality.

According to Bernis, closure has emerged at this moment in Western societies such as the United States

*because of the persuasive efforts of victims' rights organizations, death penalty advocates, politicians, funeral home directors, wrongful death attorneys, and a variety of others. These groups have provided rhetorics and narratives that effectively frame "closure" as an emotional state people need to experience if they want to resolve or transcend feelings of loss. Most crucially, Bernis highlights how organizations and businesses use closure as a powerful tool to sell grieving people an assortment of services, products, or rituals designed to "heal their pain."*

Bernis' observations about the nature and uses of closure do not resolve the question of how universal or diverse human emotions are. What her analysis does demonstrate, however, is that the emotion of closure is profoundly shaped by social factors, such as cultural narratives that value efficiency, consumerism, and quick remedies for pain or suffering. In the end, Bernis's discussion of closure illustrates that we should not assume that people throughout history and across varying contexts experience, express, and manage loss and grief similarly. No matter how universal an emotion may be, social experience, interpretations, and organizations influence how individuals experience it. In turn, if you want to understand human emotion, you must understand how peoples' subjective experience reflects their social experience and interactions.



Twenty years ago a drunk driver killed Julie's husband, but she tells the story as if it just happened. You can still hear the pain and love in her voice as she thoughtfully passes around a picture of her husband and shares her grief. Julie talks to groups, such as high school students and prisoners, to raise awareness about the dangers of drinking and driving. She wants to prevent someone else from experiencing the grief she intimately knows, but she also simply wants to tell her story.

Some people would be quick to say that Julie needs closure so that she can "move on" with her life and stop dwelling on her loss. In our society, we have expectations that grief is short-term, or at least "acceptable grief" is short-term. The concept of closure gets wrapped up in these perceptions. Although there are numerous interpretations of the word closure, it usually relates to an ending. Closure typically implies that something is finished, ended, closed. Anyone expressing grief for longer periods of time runs the risk of being told they should be "over it" by now.

However, there are many, like Julie, who hate the word closure. She unequivocally tells people, "Closure does not exist." Julie has plenty of company in criticizing this concept. Still, advice for finding closure thrives. Journalists, politicians, salespeople, and other professionals use closure as a significant theme in writing, politics, and sales.

From romantic breakups to terrorist attacks people are expected to find closure after bad things happen. Closure has become a central concept for explaining what we need after trauma and loss. Yet there is no agreed upon answer for what closure means or how you are supposed to find it. Closure has been described—in contradictory ways—as justice, peace, healing, acceptance, forgetting, remembering, forgiveness, moving on, answered questions, or revenge.

It is important to pay attention to closure talk because it shapes our expectations for how we are supposed to grieve. Many people now assume you need closure to grief in order to heal properly. In spite of the popular use of the term, closure is not

some naturally occurring emotion that we can simply find with the right advice. However, we continue to hear from media, family, co-workers, politicians, and salespeople that we *need* closure. Constructed as a need that we must fill, closure has become a popular marketing tool. It is a central part of sales talks in the funeral, grief, relationship advice, and memorialization industries. Closure has also emerged as a powerful political tool for talking about social problems, including grief, victimization, the criminal justice system, capital punishment, DNA collection, terrorism, and public memorials.

### A New Emotion

Closure has become a new emotion for explaining what we need after trauma and loss and how we should respond. When I argue that closure is a new emotion, I am not claiming that people are experiencing some feelings that were never felt before, such as the experience of grief lessening. I am arguing that there is a new way of thinking about and talking about emotions (Berns 2011).

Although humans' physiological emotional responses may be limited, the way we label emotional states and try to achieve (or not achieve) them changes. For instance, consider "self-esteem." Although people may have always had some level of regard for themselves, the idea of "self-esteem" is recent (and quite different from "pride," which was long considered sinful.) Self-esteem became a goal for people to achieve for themselves and for others, especially children. It resulted in products, experts, curricula, and policy decisions. The creation of self-esteem had significant consequences.

Similarly, people have felt grief and may have wished that it would end, but "closure" is a new term and new way of thinking and acting on this grief. Our grandparents did not seek closure after the death of a loved one. Closure is a state that people want to bring about in themselves and in others. And, like "self-esteem," it has resulted in new products, rituals, experts, strategies, and ways of seeing the world. This is especially true in the





funeral industry. Historically, funeral rituals had many purposes: comforting the grieving, caring for the body, preparing the departed for the next life, building solidarity among the survivors, sharing religious messages, and so on. The importance of these purposes varied culturally and historically. However, for the past two decades, funeral directors have emphasized the "need for closure" as a major purpose of funeral rituals. Although closure has become a form of common knowledge, there has been little critical insight into its consequences. Funeral homes would have you believe that closure will result from the products and services they provide, but there is no clear evidence that this is true.

To help explain the rise of closure and its impact on our social world, I build on research in the sociology of emotions and social constructionist studies of social problems. From the sociology of emotions, I use the understanding that society provides *feeling rules* and people are expected to change their emotions to fit these rules. Feeling rules are informal guidelines that tell us how we should react to certain situations. Societies and institutions have different feeling rules, and these rules change, with consequences for the people who are expected to meet them. Furthermore, when one set of feeling rules becomes dominant in a culture, it makes it difficult for us to imagine other ways of handling a situation. Closure represents a new set of feeling rules and expectations for people.

From the social constructionist study of social problems, I build on the idea that how we name and describe experiences has consequences. "Closure" is not some naturally occurring emotion that we can simply "find" with the right advice. Rather, closure is a socially constructed concept: a frame used to explain how we should respond to loss. The term "frame" has been adopted from the sociologist Erving Goffman to describe how people identify, interpret, understand, and label their experiences and to explain social problems. We make something like closure "real" through social interactions. Any understanding we have of closure comes from how people have defined it through

stories, arguments, court cases, and so on. This does not mean that the pain from loss is just imaginary, but how we interpret and respond to the loss is shaped by our social world, such as popular culture, life history, social norms, friends, and family.

### The Popularity of Closure

Closure is entrenched in our popular culture NOT because it is a well-defined, understood concept that we *know* individuals need but rather because it is a useful way to tell stories for some people, including journalists, salespeople, and politicians. And, significantly, people generally use closure to refer to other people's pain more readily than their own. Closure is a socially constructed concept that often causes more harm than good.

The myth that you need closure after bad things happen continues to pervade understandings about pain and loss. This idea rests on other misconceptions about how our emotions work. For example, "you can always be happy" is another distortion. We are told to push aside grief, sadness, and just be happy, which drives our consumerism. Not happy? Buy this or do that. We are bombarded with advertising that tells us true happiness is one phone call or one click away (plus \$19.99).

A favorite idea in "pop psychology" assumes we can simply change our attitudes. *Just smile. Be happy. Don't cry. Look on the bright side.* However, this is not an accurate portrayal of how we experience emotions. There is nothing wrong with being happy. The problem comes when we sacrifice grief and sadness in order to seek happiness. Grieving is not a dirty word. Yes, it hurts, but it is also helpful. You can still live life and have deep and profound joy while carrying sadness.

We live in a society that is uneasy with pain. There are few storylines that allow us to sit with pain and grieve for very long, let alone for the rest of our lives. It is not surprising that journalists and television producers are also cautious about showing too much pain without a happy ending. Happy and inspiring endings are dominant themes in mass media that open the way for the concept





of closure. An editor for *Good Housekeeping* told me that a positive resolution to any problem is an important part of good storytelling. "If you leave people unresolved and adrift, it is not going to give the reader the sense that she can also take charge in her life." Editors and producers believe that people need to be given hope that situations can change and that there will be a happy ending or they will not tune in form more. People do not like downers. The concept of closure provides a perfect framework for telling stories about pain and grief while providing a reassuring ending.

### Types of Closure Talk

Closure means many different things to people. It has no one set definition or usage. Although it is used in legal contexts, there is no official legal definition of closure. And it is used in some psychological settings, but again, the definitions vary. Even though multiple definitions of closure exist, a dominant use of it has emerged as reflected in popular culture and in dictionary definitions. The most common understanding of closure implies a "satisfying end" to something. A sense of finality.

A satisfying sense of finality? If you get stuck on the world "satisfying," you are not alone. Common definitions in dictionaries and psychological research include the concept of a satisfying conclusion as a part of closure. It is not hard to see why others bristle at the idea that there can be anything satisfying regarding death or the end of other painful relationships.

Why are there contradictory meanings about closure and so many different suggestions for how to find it? And why do some people hate the word? Closure talk is tangled, in part, because people apply it to a wide variety of situations. In addition to the various definitions of closure and the diverse range of issues connected to it, there are also different types of emotions that people are trying to manage. Closure is used in two seemingly contradictory ways. Sometimes people use it to refer to something they want to end. Other times people use it to refer to something they want to keep. To

help us state unraveling the tangled web of closure, I distinguish six types of closure talk.

When people use the word "closure," they generally do not stop and explain what they mean by it. Usually people assume that others know. Assuming everyone understands the world the same way is one reason why there is confusion and frustration with the concept.

Closure implies an end to something, but what is it that we are trying to end? Some people are trying to end a particular task associated with death. Others want to end a relationship because of a breakup or divorce. Still other uses of closure imply ending bad emotions. The breadth of what people are trying "to end" is far reaching. Furthermore, the different rituals proposed for *how* to end whatever it is people are trying to end are also unlimited.

I use the term "closure talk" to refer to how people use the concept of closure and to emphasize that closure is a part of storytelling. It shapes the story: here is what the problem is and here is how to solve it. However, I am not arguing that these suggestions will work for people. I only mean to demonstrate that various ways in which closure is used. Importantly, these categories are not mutually exclusive; multiple meanings of closure are frequently used for the same situation.

*Closing a chapter* is the first type of closure talk. Closing a chapter often refers to finishing the ritual regarding the burial of a loved one, ending a court case, "getting over grief," or formally ending a relationship. The idea behind this type of closure talk is that some aspect of a traumatic event is wrapped up. People may be advised to go through a ritual in order to mark the chapter's close.

A second type of closure talk, *remembering*, seems paradoxical. At face value, the word "closure" implies closing something. So you might ask, "How does remembering help one to close anything?" In this case, one is trying to end the fear of forgetting. People often fear forgetting a loved one after he or she has died. Closing the fear of forgetting may mean feeling assured that



you have figured out how to remember. You can assure yourself that you have memories and rituals to show respect to loved ones. Remembering as a type of closure talk is prevalent in the memory business. Those individuals selling products that help memorialize a loved one rely on people's fear of forgetting.

*Forgetting* is a third type of closure talk. Seeking closure through forgetting appears to contradict the strategy of closure through remembrance. Whether one wants to remember an event or person—or forget it—is subjective and contextual. Emotions, memories, and people you might want to end or leave behind include other people's pain, your pain, images of tragedy, anger, political scandals, guilt, abusive partners, ex-partners, testimonies, and other events during criminal trials. Forgetting may also represent what people want to do about others' pain. Wanting to move on from another person's grief can inspire calls for closure.

*Getting even* represents a fourth type of closure talk. Some say people need to end the injustice, pain, and/or anger in their lives through revenge. Those who are hurting are told by others that they can find closure when the person who hurt them suffers punishment and/or physical pain, and in some cases, death. Getting even is also a common thread in closure talk regarding bad relationships. Revenge or vengeance has long been a staple of politics and popular culture. Mock vengeance is used to sell closure for bad relationships. Death penalty supporters tell others that an execution will provide closure.

The problem of unanswered questions frames the fifth type of closure talk—*knowing*. After a death or during a missing persons case, family members live with haunting questions. Some people argue that having answers to these questions will provide closure. "Knowing" is supposed to end the unresolved questions and worries. Traumatic deaths that leave behind questions provide a group of potential customers for people selling investigative services such as autopsies, psychic readings, and private investigations.

*Confessing or forgiving* is a final type of closure talk. Advocates who use this type argue that confessing or offering an apology can provide closure by ending guilt or shame. Similarly, others claim that receiving an apology or forgiving someone helps one find closure by ending anger. The idea of closure through confession, forgiveness, or apology is intended to affect one's emotions and state of mind.

In spite of the range of interpretations reflected in these examples, all six types imply that closure exists and carry the assumptions that closure is (1) possible, (2) good, (3) desired, and (4) necessary. Closure encourages the idea that grief is bad and therefore something that needs to end. These assumptions, and the larger narratives that carry them, build feeling rules for how we are supposed to respond when bad things happen.

### Feeling Rules

In the early 1980s, sociologist Arlie Hochschild challenged traditional theories of emotion by writing about emotions as social objects that are shaped by individuals and society. Instead of believing that emotions are instinctual, sociologists explain that emotions are shaped through our social interactions. Although there are emotional physiological responses that happen, the way we label these emotions and how we judge the appropriateness of them are shaped through social expectations.

We attempt to manage our emotions in different situations in an effort to look and feel the way we think we are supposed to feel in any given context. Hochschild (1983) uses the concept of feeling rules as a way to explain the consequences narratives have on people's emotions. Feeling rules are informal guidelines we learn about how we are supposed to feel and how we should show that feeling in specific situations. We learn about feeling rules through previous experiences and cultural narratives. Cultural narratives are the stories and advice passed along through media, professionals, family, and friends. We use these narratives or stories to make sense of our own lives and our emotions (Loseke 2000).



An example of a feeling rule about grief is the common belief that one should be visibly grieving at a funeral. The truth is that sometimes people might go to a funeral and not feel an emotion they recognize as grief (or that others recognize). Or one might be grieving but not crying. Sometimes people will try to make themselves cry to match what they think others expect.

When the feeling rules fail, or do not produce the emotions promised, individuals may experience emotive dissonance—a disconnect between what they feel and what they think they should feel. For example, in many cases, funeral directors tell family members that particular rituals for viewing a body and holding a funeral service will provide them closure. So if you are told that you will find closure after a funeral, you might expect peace and healing. However, it may be that the feeling that you associate with the concept of closure does not come after the funeral. You have a disconnect between what you expected to feel and what you actually feel. The degree of disconnect will vary among individuals depending on relationships to the deceased, prior experiences, and also the initial general expectations for what a funeral will provide. Even though we are exposed to similar narratives about grief, we do not embrace them in the same way.

How we are supposed to feel—feeling rules—are frequently followed by suggestions for how we should accomplish those feelings. In discussions about closure, politicians, advocates, entrepreneurs, counselors, family, or friends are often quick to offer specific steps or rituals to follow in order to find closure.

### **Selling Closure**

Winding its way through different avenues such as politics, law, media, self-help, and the funeral industry, closure has emerged as a dominant—though not consistent—concept in our everyday talk about grief and loss. It has become a central part of sales talks in the funeral, grief, relationship advice, and memorialization industries. This marketing

reinforces further the popular belief that closure exists and can be found. Closure has emerged as a “need” that people can fill through services such as funerals, psychic readings, private investigations, lawsuits, memorials, executions, divorce parties, private cremations, and autopsies. Although closure is not the only need that is used in selling these services and products, it has emerged as an important theme in advertising for these industries.

Using closure in marketing is appealing to businesses. For one reason, selling closure is a more comfortable idea to sell than other services or products, such as autopsies, embalming, expensive caskets, lawsuits, divorce parties, private investigations, DNA profile kits, and so on. These are difficult services to sell, but the emotional appeal of closure is something that resonates with many people. Alternative ways of grieving are marginalized if they do not require buying products or services. Industries profit from people’s emotions and grief while shaping how people are supposed to feel and respond to death. The marketing of closure implies that you need money to grieve “properly.”

Closure has been transformed into something that people believe can be bought and sold—the commodification of closure. Even if you are not one of the people buying products because of closure marketing, your social world is still affected by the selling of closure. Feeling rules for grief are shaped by the marketing rhetoric, and those around you may use the closure frame in responding to others’ grief or yours. But closure is not something concrete that can be sold. It is a subjective, constructed concept that varies in interpretation depending on the context and audience.

Furthermore, the idea of closure is not just a marketing device. Used to tell stories about an array of issues, including grief, victimization, the criminal justice system, capital punishment, abortion, terrorism, adoption, euthanasia, and school violence, closure has developed into a powerful political tool for talking about social problems.

Closure changes its meaning depending on the context and audience, which makes it easy to use



in political arguments. The idea of closure provides a form of political shadowing. Shining the light on closure and victims' pain and healing allows more politically cumbersome issues to stay in the shadows. For example, death penalty advocates claim that killing a murderer will bring closure to the families of homicide victims. They can use the more uplifting rhetoric of closure and therapy for victims in order to mask particularly difficult problems of capital punishment, such as racial and class discrimination, questions of innocence, and incompetent legal counsel.

The use of this argument in politics has led to the institutionalization of closure, which is the establishment of opportunities for victims to achieve closure within institutions such as the legal system. For example, closure rhetoric has helped advocates establish victim impact statements and family members' right-to-view executions legislation. Practices such as these embed closure within the criminal justice system as well as normalize and establish it as part of justice. The institutionalization of closure furthers its impact beyond a mere rhetorical tool as it becomes something that people try to achieve within the legal system. Closure is made more "real" through institutional practices. After all, why would we have these policies if closure did not exist? The politics and policies connected to closure further reinforce feeling rules for grief. Once a concept has become institutionalized, you are less likely to examine how it emerged as a belief or imagine alternative views that might be better in understanding your world.

### Consequences of Seeking Closure

The closure frame limits the possibilities for how we think about grief and fails to capture the experience of many who face death or some other loss. The message frequently heard is that people should seek closure after bad things happen. What happens when that closure is not found? What if closure does not even exist? Or if closure is not what people really want?

Lessons about how we are supposed to react to bad things lead to confusion and, at times, anger. Not everyone agrees with the assumptions that closure is possible, good, desired, and necessary. Some even disagree with the simple premise that closure exists. Closure talk can elicit intense negative reactions from people because of the assumptions underlying the concept. When the feeling rules fail, or do not produce the emotions promised, individuals may experience a disconnect between what they feel and what they think they should feel.

The concept of closure taps into a desire to have things ordered and simple, but experiences with loss and grief are typically messy, complicated, and not easily resolved. Still, we long for peace, order, and resolution. The appeal of closure rests in large part on the hope that pain will lessen and healing will come. Yes, of course, we long for healing and we should seek it. But healing can come without closure.

It is not the mere presence of closure as a concept that is a problem. The concern comes when people believe closure has to be achieved in order to move forward. This has led to all sorts of people promising closure as a way to sell products, services, and politics. Furthermore, the pressure to find closure may lead people to spend their energy trying to meet social expectations when privately they resent the idea of closure, or, worse, they may wonder if something is wrong with them because they do not have it.

The closure frame presents a plan to navigate and contain grief—not just your own but others' grief, too. This frame may be appealing since it keeps grief and loss tidy and short-lived, but it is a poor reflection of what many people experience when grieving a deep loss. Although the closure frame shapes feeling rules for grieving, people often do not experience grief in the way these rules predict. Frequently, people's own experiences with grief do not match social expectations for grieving. Many who are grieving give others what they expect—a sense of closure. In other words, an impression that they are doing fine, but privately they continue to grieve.



Closure frequently becomes a one-word description of what we are supposed to find at the end of the grieving process. The concept of closure often comes across as if there is a box you receive when someone dies and you are to fit all your feelings into that box—nice and tidy—in order to put it on a shelf. Closure. But many people's experiences and feelings do not fit into that box. There are many who grieve outside the box. And for some there may be memories and emotions they never want to pack away.

The appeal of closure resonates with our hope that pain will end quickly and healing will come. But closure does not capture the complexity of grief. We learn to live with loss, and often deepen our love and strength through that journey. Our hope comes from knowing you do not need closure to heal. Our freedom comes in allowing people to carry joy and grief together.

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#### Reflective Questions

1. Why are societies so concerned about managing intense emotions such as loss and grief? Why are these emotions regarded as so vexing or troubling? Interview a friend or family member about a significant loss they've experienced, such as a divorce or breakup. Is that loss still a source of discomfort or grief for him or her? Does he or she mention wanting or needing a sense of "closure" in dealing with it? If so, how has he or she tried to find closure?
2. What is closure? Why has it emerged as such an important emotion in recent decades? What social and economic forces have given rise to greater concerns about finding closure? For instance, what industries or businesses are "selling" the need for closure? What impacts do their messages have upon people who are dealing with loss and grief?
3. How does social inequality inform the politics of closure? What stories of pain and grief never get told or never qualify for the right to closure? What individuals and groups aren't included in prevailing concerns and stories about closure? For instance, are relatives of individuals who receive the death penalty seen as needing or deserving closure? Why are they typically excluded from discussions of closure?
4. Think of a painful loss you have experienced. What strategies did you use to deal with this loss? Did your friends or family influence you in any way in choosing these strategies? If so, how? Did other social sources, such as the media or Internet, influence you?



## Managing Emotional Manhood

CHRISTIAN VACCARO, DOUGLAS SCHROCK, AND JANICE MCCABE

*For many years, students of social life ignored emotions. That changed in the 1970s when a number of sociologists began to study and write about the social shaping and consequences of human emotions. As illustrated in the previous two selections, human emotions are shaped by "feeling rules." People manage not only their outward expression of emotions but also their very feelings in order to conform to such rules. They not only express but also attempt to feel what they should be feeling. Further, feeling rules vary not just historically but also within societies, organizations, and groups.*

*If that is the case, then involvement in a new group or organization necessarily involves some emotional socialization. Initiates into a group or organization need to learn new feeling rules and develop new emotion management skills. This kind of emotional socialization is probably most apparent in professional schools. Professionals such as judges, professors, and doctors are expected to put personal feelings aside and display "affective neutrality" in their work. That expectation can be especially difficult for doctors, who must touch and treat the human body in ways that would evoke repulsion or notable discomfort in most of us.*

*This selection examines the emotional socialization of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighters, who must grapple with the emotional threats posed by fear,*

*pain, fatigue, and other forms of bodily discomfort. As the authors highlight, the education of MMA fighters includes instruction in the feeling rules that apply to their sport and to expressions of masculinity. MMA fighters learn that they must suppress their fears of pain, injury, and losing if they want to battle successfully in the cage. In their efforts to manage these fears, they draw upon strategies of emotion work used in a variety of groups and social worlds. These strategies include scripting, framing, othering, and fostering fear.*

*The example of MMA fighters provides a particularly clear case of how emotions are socially shaped. It also demonstrates how emotion work is a form of gendered identity work. When MMA fighters manage their emotions, they are also involved in managing and displaying their "manhood." Their concerted efforts to suppress, regulate, and call forth emotions helps us to see what we are all doing less self-consciously most of the time—managing feelings.*

While fighters in the locker room prepared for combat in the cage, two men from the previous fight staggered in. Juan—the victor—had shiny contusions under both eyes and made it to a folding chair where he sat staring into space. As two paramedics tried to keep him conscious, he cracked a smile with swollen lips and tried unsuccessfully to communicate meaningfully. As

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the paramedics carried Juan off on a stretcher, Mike—his opponent—leaned against a wall and talked with his trainer. As blood flowed from his nose and mouth, Mike began to sob. His trainer handed him a towel, which he brought to his face with shaking hands. When asked if he was upset about Juan, he pulled away the bloodied towel and said, “I don’t like losing.”

Juan and Mike’s post-fight experiences highlight what competitors of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) most often say they fear: injury and losing. Competitions generally occur in a locked cage and fighters wear thin, open-fingered gloves and are allowed to punch, kick, wrestle, and use martial arts techniques. Fights are broken into rounds and end when one fighter submits or “taps out” due to pain or exhaustion, is rendered unconscious, is deemed physically unable to continue by a referee, or time runs out. Preparing for these fights entails not only perfecting “guillotine chokes” and “superman punches,” it also involves fighting fear.

Although MMA fighters’ emotion management may appear unique, it reflects a long-lived cultural mandate that “real men” control their fear and other emotions (Kimmel 1996). Peers (Fine 1987), parents (McGuffey 2008), and coaches (Messner 1992) often ostracize boys who express fear, pain, empathy, and sadness. Boys learn that they are supposed to exhibit emotional restraint and “quiet control” (Messner 2009: 96). As adults, men often face fear, whether at work (Haas 1977), on the street (Anderson 1999), or in leisure activities (Holyfield and Fine 1997). And not letting fear get the best of you—exhibiting bravery—is a culturally revered quality of manhood (see, e.g., Connell 1995). But how do men control their emotions, and what does this have to do with gender identity?

Our study . . . show[s] how men’s emotion management can constitute gendered “identity work” (Snow and Anderson 1987). To emphasize the gendered and professional aspects of this emotional identity work, we refer to the MMA fighters’ emotion management as managing emotional manhood. We define managing emotional manhood

as emotion work that signifies a masculine self. Importantly, by the “masculine self” we are not referring to a psychological entity, how men view themselves, or the self-concept. Rather, we take the dramaturgical view that the masculine self is a virtual reality, a self that is imputed to actors based on the information given or given off (Goffman 1959). Schwalbe (2005) defines such identity work as a “manhood act” and emphasizes that signifying control is fundamental. Manhood here is not a static concept, but a malleable image that is constructed for public consumption. While there are many ways that males can put on a convincing manhood act (see Schrock and Schwalbe’s [2009] review), in this study we emphasize that controlling and transforming one’s own or others’ emotions—especially fear—is key. Emotions here are not simply added to or subtracted from one’s presumed manhood (as if manhood exists as a thing rather than a social construction); they are expressions that signify what kind of man one is. As we show, managing emotional manhood can be accomplished individually as well as interpersonally and can prime one to risk one’s well-being in a quest to dominate others. . . .

### Setting and Method

Data for this study derive from 24 months of fieldwork and 121 interviews. The first author gained access to a local MMA gym after calling the owner, Bruce, mentioning a long-time friendship with a professional fighter who had once been Bruce’s training partner, and talking about his research interests. The ethnographer observed and openly jotted notes at about 100 evening practices at Steel Hangar Gym, which was located in a small industrial park on the outskirts of a midsized southeastern city. . . .

The first author conducted 24 formal 45- to 75-minute interviews with 15 local and 9 regional fighters and 97 brief 5- to 15-minute short interviews at competitions with 64 fighters and 15 trainers, promoters, and officials (some fighters were interviewed multiple times). . . . Of the interviewees,



70 percent were white, 16 percent were black, 11 percent were Hispanic, and 3 percent were Asian. They ranged in age from 19 to 40 (average = 26.5). The majority (18 out of 25) of local interviewees had earned degrees from a community college or university. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

As the first author began fieldwork, he shared copies of field notes, and the coauthors became intrigued by fighters' allusions to fear. This initial interest sensitized us to pay attention to how fear permeated the field and also led us to create interview questions aimed to better understand (a) what fighters worried about and (b) how they managed it. These questions also guided the coding of field notes and interview transcripts, which led to creating typologies of what they most feared (injury and losing) and how they managed their fear (scripting, framing, and othering). . . .

### The Fears of Fighting

Underneath their bravado, Mixed Martial Arts fighters harbored fear. During interviews, at the local gym, and in locker rooms before competitions, the fighters often alluded to their fears by talking about "nerves," being "nervous," "worries," "pre-fight jitters," and "butterflies." For example, just before their fights, Ted said, "Oh, I'm nervous as hell!" and Buster said, "I was nervous. I was in the back about to throw up." Shortly after winning a fight, Robin said, "I was extremely nervous going into this." After losing fights, the men often blamed their poor performances on fear. For example, Ted explained, "It must have been nerves or something," and Garrett said, "I sort of felt like I kind of panicked and bitched out a little bit." As Garrett implied, uncontrollable fear was like being momentarily inhabited by womanhood, which is probably why fighters usually—but not always—avoided saying "I'm afraid/scared/fearful." Saying they were nervous or worried was arguably less damaging to their manhood acts. MMA fighters most commonly talked about fearing injury and losing. Fighters understood how painful injuries

were and that serious ones could end their fighting careers, or worse. There have been two well-publicized deaths of fighters resulting from brain injuries sustained in North American MMA fights since 2007. Although interviewees agreed that, as Rocky put it, "in most cases you're going to come out of it [and] you're going to live," death lurked in the shadows of the cage. When asked what he worried about before his fights, for example, Kenneth said, "You are wondering if they are thinking of this incredible move that is really going to kill you." Dominic said, "This sport is not golf; you can't get hurt or killed playing golf." The possibility of death elevated MMA's manhood quotient. Fighters more frequently discussed worrying about injuries they could live through. Dean worried about "getting choked out or . . . getting hurt." Lou said, "I can get my arm broken [or] my nose broken, I can just get pounded." Jimmy said, "I was apprehensive about getting hurt."

Such fears were not unfounded. Local fighters suffered dislocated ribs and concussions, Louis tore his ACL, Rocky broke his foot and seriously injured his back, Lou broke his wrist and finger, and Dominic's retina became detached from his eye twice. Garrett and Dominic had elbow surgeries to remove bone fragments, and Garrett also had surgery to remove a damaged appendix. One local fighter suffered bleeding in his brain and required an induced coma and brain surgery to keep him alive. Because injuries were common, fighters could not easily escape the specter of pain.

In addition to fearing injury, cage fighters also feared losing. Casey feared looking "like a chump in front of all these people . . . if you get knocked out at your first fight in three seconds, then that's all they will remember." Mike said, "You really don't want to let your family or teammates down," and Kenneth said, "The name of the [MMA] school is kind of riding on you. You have to represent for your school." Minutes after Dean lost a fight, he said, "I feel like shit! I came out in front of my hometown and I got tapped out in like under a minute." Buster said, "The feeling of losing is the



worst feeling in the world, especially when you sell 100 tickets and you have a lot of your friends and family there. . . .”

Cage fighters had much to fear. Injuries were inevitable and threatened to end their careers. Losing was also difficult to stomach, although it also seems unavoidable. Being controlled by fear, shame, or pain, however, would have undermined their manhood act, as expressing such emotions contradicted feeling rules culturally bound to manhood. But if the men could fight off their fears and foster it in their opponents, they might be victorious men.

### Fighting Fear

Fighters often said that feeling fear itself was not the problem as long as they kept it under control. As Taylor put it, “Fear is an okay thing as long as you can manage it.” This belief let them off the hook if they felt some fear but also oriented them toward controlling it. As we will show, their emotion work often involved transforming fear into confidence, which is more consistent with cultural ideals of manhood. One reason that feeling but managing fear is “okay” is that keeping one’s poise in a dangerous situation constitutes one of our culture’s most honored characteristics of manhood: bravery (see, e.g., Connell 1995). As Rudyard Kipling (1976: 163–64) put it in a poem often memorized by schoolboys: “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you . . . you’ll be a Man, my son!” To avoid losing their heads, as well as their masculine status, cage fighters managed emotional manhood through scripting, framing, and othering.

### Scripting

To the untrained observer, cage fighting appears to be chaotic violence. Competitors themselves understood that fights are relatively unpredictable because, as Kenneth put it, “Think of all the things you need to worry about in MMA: takedowns, knees, kicks, and elbows.” To evoke a sense of control and minimize fear, fighters developed game

plans. We refer to the individual as well as the collective creation, embodiment, and review of the game plan as scripting because such work involved planning out and rehearsing combat. [As] John replied, “I just think about what I want to do. What is this guy going to try to do? If I know he’s a south-paw, what do I have to do to avoid that hook?” . . . [And] Rocky said,

Me and Dominic get together and we do extensive research . . . we go to BattleBase.net—the most complete database of fighters thus far—and look at what his [the opponent’s] record is. I look at what his [fight] style is. I look at how he’s won his fights. I look at how he’s lost his fights. And I implement that into a strict training regimen. If I’m fighting the kick boxer who wins all his fights by knock outs, you’re going to be damn sure I’m practicing my striking. . . . But if I know I’m fighting a wrestler, I’m going to be working on my kick-down defenses and my knock-out punches.

Fighters regularly searched for videos and information about opponents on YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, and other Internet sites for MMA fighters and fans, such as MMAUniverse.com and Sherdog.com. In addition, if gym members had previously seen a fight involving a future opponent of a local member, they shared what they remembered. Overall, such intelligence gathering and sharing helped fighters to script game plans that bolstered confidence and manhood.

Although such scripting minimized fear as fighters prepared for competitions, fighters believed that to be successful they needed to instill the script into “bodily memory” (McCaughey 1998: 290). As fight night neared, said Kenneth, “You should already have your game plan . . . in you right now. You don’t have time to be thinking about that kind of stuff during a fight. . . .” When asked how he dealt with his emotions as he prepared for a fight, Ed referenced embodying the script, “It is all about putting yourself in the situation over and over again, so that nothing is new to you. [T]hat’s what separates the good fighters from



the mediocre fighters: [Good ones] don't panic, they are comfortable." Embodying the script thus helped manage emotional manhood by evoking confidence....

Fighters also said that scripting helped them keep their fear under control during the emotionally intense minutes before their fights commenced. In the locker room, fighters often warmed up by hitting pads as their trainers went over their game plans. For example, after saying, "I was real nervous, I was sweating" before a recent fight and being asked if anything helped, Dustin said: "I had my coach and he was holding pads as well as telling me the game plan."...

Scripting also played a role in how the fighters made sense of both their victories and defeats in ways that preserved their commitment to enacting manhood through cage fighting. Fighters, for example, maintained the notion that scripting helped them win and control their fear by giving their game plans credit for defeating opponents. As Jimmy explained minutes after a successful bout, "I'm going to pat myself on the back and say I stuck to my game plan... I never really did get too frustrated or nervous." Even when their manhood acts in some ways failed (i.e., they lost), trainers and fighters used scripting to minimize the fear that they were not cut out for the cage and evoke confidence that they could come out on top in the future. One night at the local gym, for example, one trainer proclaimed to a fighter, "You lost when you didn't listen to my game plan." Keeping alive the idea that scripting propelled fighters to victory thus preserved it as a resource for managing emotional manhood.

Developing, embodying, and reviewing their scripts enabled fighters to keep their emotions in check and put on convincing manhood acts. Choreographing their violence was highly rational, taking into account their opponents' and their own perceived strengths and weaknesses to devise strategies. Such scripting thus not only signified manhood by minimizing fear but also by denoting rationality, a key cultural marker of manhood.

## Framing

MMA fighters also used framing to do emotion work that signified masculine selves. Following Goffman (1974), we define a frame as a definition that answers the question, "What is going on here?" Framing shapes how one not only thinks about a situation but also how one feels.... Fighters' emotional framing most often involved defining cage fights as (a) just another day in the gym, (b) business, and (c) a valuable experience. They used these strategies individually and interpersonally, although they generally hid them from members of the local gym who did not compete in competitions.

Framing a fight as just another day in the gym boosted confidence and mitigated fear by defining competitions as banal. Although the audience, announcers, ring girls, medical professionals, and steel cage made competitions objectively different than training, fighters often equated fights with everyday training. Lou said that he kept "calm and composed" by thinking "in my mind that [the fight] is a sparring match. [I] think of it as another day in the gym." When asked how they dealt with their emotions prior to a competition, Scotty said, "Just be natural and do the same things that I do in the gym"; Felix answered, "I basically want the mindset that I have in practice"; and Nick said he "stay[s] cool because it's just like every other day in training." Such framing thus managed emotional manhood by mitigating fear.

Unlike scripting, framing fights as "just another day in the gym" was not part of the culture of the local gym. Because many men trained but did not participate in competitions, MMA fighters preserved their status as more dominant men by maintaining a public distinction between training and competition. Backstage, however, MMA competitors learned about this emotion management strategy from veteran fighters and trainers. When asked about how he helps fighters control their pre-fight emotions, for example, Dominic said:

A lot of those conversations happen behind closed doors. [Or] at three in the morning. You get a phone



call from a fighter and he is like, "I don't know that I can do this." And you have to be like, "Yes, you can. You do this every day in the gym."

Whereas fighters often presented themselves as invincible in the gym, they expressed more vulnerability backstage. In these hidden moments, more experienced fighters often engaged in interpersonal emotion work to ease their fears. Although such emotional support is culturally coded as "feminine," new fighters used what they learned to enact emotional manhood.

In addition to defining the fight as another day in the gym, fighters also managed fear by framing the fight as business. For example, Victor said, "Before a fight you are always a little nervous . . . but when you step into the cage . . . you just go and do your job. It is like an everyday office guy." . . . Larry said, "A true professional in this sport approaches this as a business . . . I got to put this dude down and get my money so I can put food on the table." . . .

In contradiction to framing the fight as "just another day in the gym," the fighters also mitigated fear by framing the fight as a valuable experience. Newcomers more often used this strategy than veterans. When asked what helped him deal with emotions before a recent fight, Steven said, "I just kind of looked at it as there's no pressure on me . . . it's an opportunity, obviously, to get some experience and [I should] just go out and enjoy it." Isaac managed emotional manhood by framing a fight in the wider context of his biography:

When I showed up . . . all those doubts crept into my mind. Doubts like, "Why in the hell am I doing this?" There is obviously a risk of having your face punched in. . . . "Why am I doing this to myself? Why do I put myself in this position?" So for me what works is just to sit back . . . and say, "I'm doing something that is so important to me. And it is something that I want to do so badly. And that this is something that I am going to remember for a long time. That is why this is making me this nervous."

In this example, Isaac explains how he manages his fear by framing a fight as one of his life's most cherished moments. Doing so swept his doubts under the rug, enabling him to more convincingly display emotional manhood.

While losing matches could make fighters fear that they were no longer cut out for the cage, framing their losses as valuable learning experiences often eased their fears and gave them enough confidence to continue. Nick said, for example, that a recent "loss taught me a lot of things about being inside the cage, a lot about being calm and my nerves and just how to compose myself in the cage. So this time coming in I am ready for it." Dean emphasized that even if one loses, one gains: "And all my lessons learned from losing are the kind of lessons that stick." . . .

### Othring

Fighters also mitigated fear and bolstered confidence and pride by defining themselves as superior to their opponents. Such "othering" (see, e.g., Schwalbe et al. 2000)—whether it involved creating powerful virtual selves ("implicit othering") or defining their opponents as inferior ("oppressive othering")—made them feel like victory was within reach. As we will show, both the meanings of such othering and its emotional impact helped fighters signify credible masculine selves.

Managing emotional manhood via othering was often an interpersonal process and generally involved more experienced gym members easing the less experienced members' fears. "If I say, 'Oh, I feel uncomfortable with this,'" Donovan said that his trainer tells him, "You got great hands [and] can take this guy down [and] submit him." . . . Tanner said his fears were eased when "my teammate told me that there is no way in the world that this guy is going to be as tough as the guys you're training with." Felix explained that his trainer gave him the "usual pep talk" before a recent fight: "You've trained better than this guy. You're a better fighter." Trainers and gym mates thus painted fighters as superior to their opponents, which mitigated fear



and bolstered their confidence and pride as dominant men. . . .

Fighters individually used creative variations of these othering strategies to quell their fears and emotionally prepare themselves for battle. A few drew on cultural products such as films and racial stereotypes. When asked how he kept his fear in check, Cecil, an African American fighter, said:

Right before my fight, I go ahead and do my pre-fight ritual. [Guys from] my gym call me "King Kong" because of my grappling style and [so] I awaken that inner gorilla . . . I rock back and forth and I have visions of a gorilla coming out of a cage, [like] when King Kong comes out of the cage and he pounds his chest powerfully just as lightning strikes. I hear the thunder and [see] lightning hitting the ground when I roar. You hear my roar and you look at my eyes. And I am ready to go into the cage.

Like medical students envisioning themselves as healers in order to mitigate their fear of disgust (Smith and Kleinman 1989), Cecil quelled fear and bolstered confidence by viewing himself as an animalistic monster. He thus drew on a film to symbolically align himself with dehumanizing stereotypes of violent African American men (see Collins 2004), which ironically helped him emotionally signify that he was a "real man."

Fighters' othering used not only Hollywood scripts but also video games as resources. After Rocky asserted that he does not fear the cage, he was asked how he managed that. He said:

I pretty much think of it as a video game. He has a little energy bar and a stamina bar above his head and every time I hit him that bar goes down. I try to think about the fact that every second that I don't hit him that energy bar may be going back up. I think of myself the same way, except I pretend that my energy bar never goes down. It's just like I am in invincible mode.

Similar to medical students who manage emotions by, for example, "dehumanizing" a patient as

a "broken toaster" (Smith and Kleinman 1989: 61), Rocky muted fear by constructing his opponent as well as himself as pixelated pugilists. His othering also conveyed masculine dominance by representing his virtual self as so "invincible" that "nothing can hurt me."

In addition to defining themselves as physically superior to their opponents, fighters also regulated emotions by constructing themselves as mentally superior. [As] a veteran fighter said:

The specific thing that I always tell myself is that I am way smarter than the other guy. And that may or may not be true obviously, but that's the thought I have because everybody trains their asses off for a fight. . . . For me, I am going to say—while I am looking across [the cage]—that, "I know you trained hard, but I trained better. I trained smarter. I know more of what I am doing than you do. I am going to be able to think faster than you and be able to deal with any situation you put me in better than you."

. . . Instead of focusing on their own mental or physical acuity, some fighters painted opponents as, emotionally speaking, insufficiently masculine. When Dominic was asked how he dealt with his nerves before entering the cage, he said,

I like thinking about the fact that whatever the other guy is doing, you're going to beat him anyway. If the guy needs to cry like a girl in order to fight, you are still going to beat him. If he needs his parents in the stands to support him, you are still going to beat him.

Drawing on the larger culture, Dominic thus constructed competitors as fearful girls who depended on others ("parents") for emotional support. Other fighters similarly managed their own fear by imagining their opponent as fearful, which is culturally associated with women. As a veteran local fighter put it:

What I think about . . . is not that I'm nervous, but I'm thinking about the fact that he's fucking nervous, you know what I'm saying? I know that



somewhere deep down in his heart there's at least one ounce of fear or apprehensiveness or tentativeness and I just like to play on that. I imagine that he's scared shitless.

Similar to how nascent male-to-female transsexuals engage in "personal pep talks" to control fear when preparing to go out in public as women (Schrock, Boyd, and Leaf 2009), fighters' masculinist self-talk bolstered their confidence as they set forth to bash symbolic women.

Before fighters left the locker room and entered the arena, trainers often engaged in othering to emotionally prepare them. . . . Nationalism and implicit racism were occasionally used in such othering, which bolstered confidence as fighters headed to the cage. In the locker room before one contest, Larry and his trainer—both of whom were white and U.S. citizens—were waiting as Larry's opponent—a Peruvian national—entered the cage. Larry's trainer then told him that he had requested a "special song" be played for his own entrance. As Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" began to play loudly over the sound system, the crowd erupted. Larry glanced at his trainer and cracked a smile, pounded his fists together, and confidently growled, "I'm taking this fucker to school" as they entered the arena.

Fighters' othering—which defined fighters as superior to their opponents—constituted managing emotional manhood. Such othering drew on cultural ideals and stereotypes, was accomplished individually and interpersonally, and not only kept fighters' fear under control but bolstered confidence as they entered an objectively fear-inducing situation. Thus, othering cultivated emotional expressions that resonated with gendered feeling rules and signified, in the dramaturgical sense, a masculine self.

### Fostering Fear

Another way fighters managed emotional manhood was by fostering fear in their opponents. Inducing fear in other men essentially signified

that they themselves were so powerful that they could turn other men, emotionally speaking, into women. Such emotional micropolitics not only raised one's own status (Clark 1990) but also signified masculine selves—that is, it conveyed that they were in control of not only their own but also their opponents' feelings.

Competitions provided many opportunities for the men to try to evoke fear in their opponents. The day before a match, fighters saw each other during weigh-ins and meetings with promoters and officials. Fighters sometimes strategically intimidat[ed] opponents; they walked around "trying to be a badass," as one fighter put it. Local fighters sometimes donned new hairstyles at competitions that bolstered their tough image, such as getting a Mohawk, dying their hair outlandish colors, or shaving it off.

Interviewees sometimes strategically displayed their physique and, if given a chance, added some verbal innuendo intended to evoke fear. After discussing how he managed his own fear, for example, Taylor said, "Not everybody is built like me. I've had guys that have just seen me and backed out of a fight before." Asked to expound, he described what happened at a tough man contest:

I'm walking around with my shirt off. . . . And another guy walks up to me and he says, "Hey what weight class are you fighting in?" And I said, "I'm fighting a light weight." And he looks at me and he's like, "Man, there is no way you're a light weight." And since then I ain't never seen that guy again. He was obviously in my weight class [and] was like, "Shit." And the next thing you know, all the promoters were talking, "We just lost a fighter." (mutual laughter) Intimidation is a huge, huge, huge portion of it.

Here Taylor suggests that he evoked fear in his opponent by going shirtless and displaying his considerable muscularity. Telling his opponent that he was fighting "a lightweight" instead of "in the lightweight division" may have also been effective. The weigh-in ritual was a key moment in which



fighters attempted to intimidate each other. It generally began with fighters being called up for quick medical checkups. During this time, the room was filled with chatter and laughter as fighters, trainers, and promoters from different cities mingled. When it was time for fighters to weigh in, however, fighters and trainers coalesced into gym-based groups and—except for the announcer calling up opponents—the room was silent. When called, fighters walked up to the center of the stage, wearing nothing but boxers, and stepped on a scale. After their weight was announced, they flexed their muscles and briefly posed for pictures. Once each opponent did this, the two men posed together for “stare down” photos, in which they stood eye-to-eye in fighting stances. When asked how he tried to intimidate his opponent during the pre-fight ritual, Forrest said:

You never let them know that you're scared of them. So you always look them dead in the eye. Never back down, never do anything to make it look like you're nervous. You know, just pretend like you're—act like you're confident the whole time.

Keeping one's own fear under control was thus key to instilling fear in opponents. Fighters typically put on one of three intimidating personas during the stare-down: (a) the arrogantly confident “High School Quarterback,” (b) the barely controllable angry “Wide-Eyed Madman,” or (c) the unflappable “Bored Russian.” The most overt attempts to induce fear were the “madmen,” who often invaded opponents' personal space and made bodily contact. On the day of the fight, fighters usually had opportunities to intimidate each other backstage, as they often shared a locker room or had backstage areas that were connected. For example, Dustin said, “The way the locker rooms were set up, I could see [my opponent] watching me when I was warming up.” Dustin said he looked at his trainer and said loudly, “Are you ready for me to knock this mother fucker out? I'm going to fuck him up!” He added, “I could just tell he didn't want to fight me . . . he was worried about it.” When

Garrett similarly saw his opponent checking him out in the locker room, he whacked the punching mitts his trainer was holding with particular vigor, hoping to intimidate his opponent. Managing emotional manhood thus involved using the body and language in [an] attempt to control others' emotions. . . .

Many fighters said they tried to intimidate opponents when entering the cage. Most often fighters said that they attempted to do this in a subtle fashion. When asked if they tried to intimidate opponents once in the ring, Tommy said, “I try to look at his face when the referee is talking to us”; another said, “I give my opponent a little stare-down and intimidate him”; and Ayden said, “I just come out and let him know that I'm not afraid. I size him up and give a little stare.” Fighters' demeanor was thus part of their dramaturgical arsenal.

African American fighters sometimes presented themselves in ways that resonated with racial stereotypes, hoping to evoke fear in opponents. Dion would enter the ring doing “the gorilla stomp, just to intimidate my opponent . . . and get the crowd going.” At one event he was observed running into the cage and jumping vertically about four feet into the air before stomping down on the middle of the mat with both feet, shaking the whole cage and creating a loud noise that reverberated through the arena. He then charged at his opponent, who was required to remain in his corner, and repeated the gorilla stomp, coming down a mere foot from his competitor as he yelled in unison with the roaring crowd. Immediately after this fight, the loser was asked how he felt before the opening bell: “I was terrified.”

While Dion's performance constituted “passion work” (Smith 2008) because it could generate crowd excitement, it also managed emotional manhood by evoking fear in his opponent. This worked in part because the cultural stereotypes of African American men orient others to view them as dangerously animalistic and criminal (Collins 2004). If fighters sensed or caught glimpses of fear in opponents' faces, it affirmed their own manhood



and motivated them to fight with confidence. In a post-victory interview, for example, Benny said he knew "the fight was mine" before it started because "I could sense that he just wasn't ready to fight me at all . . . he was nervous."

Casey offered a bit more detail in his post-fight interview: "I looked across the cage at him—his face—he seemed kind-of scared. And I thought . . . that I'm probably going to win this. So I went out and shot right away and knocked him down." If their own violence evoked fear in opponents during a fight, the men felt particularly powerful and motivated to finish them off. As Rocky said:

Once they're all bruised up and I see the fear in their eyes and, man, I see that they realize that the fight isn't going to be as easy as they thought it was going to be—or that their game plan isn't working like they thought it was going to—that's really what gets me going.

Evoking fear in their opponents could thus work back on fighters' own emotions, motivating them to confidently attack. Managing emotional manhood involves not only fighting one's own fear but also trying to evoke it in others. By strategically manipulating their appearance, engaging in nonverbal posturing, and engaging in discursive acts, the fighters sometimes broke through their opponents' emotional defenses. Regulating their own emotions played a role in this micropolitical emotion work—whether presenting themselves as calm and collected or on the verge of rage. In addition, some men of color strategically embodied racial stereotypes that have long been used to control minority men as a resource to exert power over others. Regardless of the strategy used, the implication of this emotion work was that they, as men, should be respected and feared.

### Conclusion

... Putting on a convincing manhood act requires more than using language and the body; it also requires emotion work. By suppressing fear,

empathy, pain, and shame and evoking confidence and pride, males signify their alleged possession of masculine selves. Such emotion work may thus create an emotional orientation that primes men to subordinate and harm others. And by signifying masculine selves through evoking fear and shame in others, such men are likely to more easily secure others' deference and accrue rewards and status. Managing emotional manhood, whether it occurs in a locker room or boardroom, at home or the Oval Office, likely plays a key role in maintaining unequal social arrangements.

### Note

1. All names used are pseudonyms.

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### Reflective Questions

1. How is emotion management a form of identity work? How is this emotional identity work gendered in nature? For example, how do men strive to express their "manhood" through emotion work? What feelings are men encouraged to express? What feelings do they learn to control or suppress?
2. What are the major fears and emotional threats faced by Mixed Martial Artists? What strategies do they use to deal with these fears and threats? How do these strategies differ from one another? How do they overlap? Which strategies seem to be most effective in enabling the fighters to manage challenging emotions?
3. What feeling rules prevail among Mixed Martial Arts fighters? How do these rules compare to the emotional norms that men abide by in other sports or in male-dominated workplaces?
4. In Selection 7, Arlie Hochschild highlighted the distinction between surface acting and deep acting. How do Mixed Martial Arts fighters engage in surface acting? How do they engage in deep acting?
5. According to the authors, the management of emotional manhood plays a major role in sustaining social inequalities, especially between women and men. Why is this the case? For instance, how do the emotion management strategies used by many men evoke fear, deference, and compliance in others?



## Getting Angry to Get Ahead

BRANDON A. JACKSON AND ADIA HARVEY WINGFIELD

*The three previous selections have illustrated how emotions are socially rooted and regulated. In doing so these selections have demonstrated how individuals learn to internalize and abide by "feeling rules," or social expectations that tell them how they should feel in a given situation and how they should convey those feelings to others. These selections also revealed how individuals draw on a range of strategies to make their emotions conform to the rules that govern their social or professional settings. Yet, like most social psychological studies of emotion, these selections did not address a couple of important sociological questions: How are emotional norms and expressions shaped by racial or ethnic dynamics? And, how and why do organizations engage in collective strategies of emotion management?*

*In the following selection Brandon Jackson and Adia Harvey Wingfield provide an insightful analysis of the feeling rules that Uplift and Progress (UP), a college organization for black men, transmits to its members and recruits. Drawing on data collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews, Jackson and Wingfield illustrate how the leaders of UP teach recruits to suppress emotional displays stereotypically associated with young African American men, such as expressions of anger or a lack of humility. Ironically, UP leaders often made recruits aware of their organization's feeling rules by directing anger at them in "backstage" settings outside the view of whites. However, the leaders did not*

*convey anger for stereotypical or personal reasons. Instead, they deployed it for organizational purposes; that is, to teach recruits the emotional norms that were at the heart of UP's mission. These norms highlighted the importance of sustaining a sense of brotherhood and engaging in calm, restrained, and "professional" behavior.*

*Through their ethnographic study, Jackson and Wingfield demonstrate how an organization promotes collaborative emotion work among its members, particularly in ways that serve its core interests. UP does so by offering members an ideological framework that emphasizes what it means to act professionally, especially in a predominantly white campus setting. In a related vein, UP provides its members with strong group support for embracing its ideology, feeling rules, and emotion management strategies.*

*In addition to offering these insights, Jackson and Wingfield illustrate how backstage settings serve as regions where organizations engage in important forms of emotional socialization and where African American men can more safely and comfortably express anger or frustration, especially to promote their organization's beliefs and emotional norms. Jackson and Wingfield also reveal how and why sociological psychologists need to focus more attention on organizational emotional management, particularly if they want to gain a deeper understanding of how emotion work and identity construction are group processes.*

Reprinted from: Jackson, Brandon A. and Adia Harvey Wingfield, "Getting Getting Angry to Get Ahead: Black College Men, Emotional Performance, and Encouraging Respectable Masculinity," *Symbolic Interaction* 36(3), pp. 275-292. © 2013 Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction.



The stereotype of the “angry black man” is such a common cultural representation that it has generated numerous references in media and popular culture. Generally, this image involves a black male whose constant yelling and fierce demeanor reveal a rage and frustration that proves intimidating to whites, and reinforces the idea of black men as dangerous and threatening. Actor Samuel Jackson has been frequently associated with this image due to performances in various films, and media analysts during the 2012 presidential campaign even noted that this representation may have constrained President Obama’s emotional reactions and debate performances while seeking reelection. The angry black man image, then, is a widespread one with far-reaching implications.

Though this image is a cultural stereotype, research has shown that it has actual consequences in certain contexts. Inasmuch as black men are commonly stereotyped as frightening, scary, and menacing, black men in mostly white environments find themselves managing this image to minimize its resonance with white peers (Wingfield 2007). Thus, they may face pressure to avoid behaving in ways that reflect this stereotype.

Less is known, however, about the contexts where black men feel that it is acceptable to show emotions like anger and irritation. It is clear that the angry black man stereotype influences the extent to which black men feel comfortable showing anger in mostly white settings. Under what circumstances, though, is it permissible to show anger? What social interactions drive black men to reveal this emotion? Focusing on black male college students at a predominantly white university, we assess the ways that black men in leadership roles express anger as a means of socializing younger black men to conform to ideas about “respectable” black masculinity.

### Theoretical Framework

Research on gender and emotions generally reveals clear inequities. Dating back to Hochschild’s (1983) classic study introducing the concept of emotional

labor, researchers have shown that women are often restricted from displaying emotions that are considered legitimate and perfectly acceptable for men. Furthermore, women are expected to engage in emotional performance in ways that are consistent with gendered ideas about femininity, while men are encouraged to display emotions that evoke traditional assumptions about masculine behavior. . . .

When it comes to “negative” emotions like anger, research reveals the insidious ways that emotional performance maintains gender inequality. Generally, anger is more likely to be targeted toward those with lower status (Lively 2000), and those in low status positions that require deference usually must constrain this emotion (Leidner 1993). Ultimately, status is a significant factor in how anger is expressed, as those with higher status enjoy more opportunities to express anger than their low status counterparts (Sloan 2004). Given that men tend to hold higher status positions than women, this means that they are more likely than women to have greater opportunities for expressing anger, and that women (who are more represented in lower status positions) may often be the targets (Pierce 1995).

In a sense, the research on gender and emotions has been rather straight-forward in showing that men have more latitude to show feelings of anger and rage than do their female counterparts. This occurs in part because men are more likely to hold positions that have higher status, but also because their gender affords them higher social status than women in the same occupational category. However, most of these studies are comprised of predominantly white samples and thereby privilege gender in their analysis of emotions at the expense of other categories like race or class. Specifically, existing research has been slower to consider the ways that race and gender intersect to shape the performance of emotions like anger. Are all men equally able to display frustration, irritation, and annoyance? Does this occur for men across various racial groups? . . .



### Responding to Cultural Stereotypes: Dramaturgy in Action

... Taken together, studies [of the relationship between gender and emotion] indicate that while anger is generally an acceptable emotional expression for men, racial and gendered stereotypes create a context wherein black men may not feel that they have the same freedom to show this emotion. Furthermore, general depictions of blacks as unintelligent, unqualified, and violence-prone, as well as specific controlling images like the angry black man, can shape black men's emotional expressions in [what Erving Goffman (1959) describes as] front stage interactions. In predominantly white settings, this can lead black men to engage in impression management designed to challenge these stereotypes.

These are important findings, but these studies still leave unanswered questions. Given that the controlling image of the "angry black man" works to restrain black men from displaying anger in the front stage, what different results might appear when black men are backstage and away from racially integrated environments? How do controlling images and racial stereotypes influence black men's emotional performances in these contexts? When do black men feel that it is warranted and acceptable for them to show anger? In this article, we investigate the backstage settings that shape the circumstances in which black men feel that showing anger is legitimate and justified.

### Setting and Methods

The data presented here comes from a two-year ethnography conducted by the first author [Brandon Jackson] at Central University, a large public university in the southeast. Collecting data from black male students at a predominantly white university offers a particularly unique opportunity to study emotional performance, inasmuch as this is a social site where many blacks face racial tensions but simultaneously learn strategies for interacting with whites that they will use later in life,

especially in professional contexts (Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996).

We focus here on students within a particular campus organization for black men. *Uplift and Progress* (hereafter referred to as UP) is a national organization that is dedicated to eliminating the negative stereotypes of black men and instead encouraging positive ones. UP was founded in the late 1980s at Central University. Though the organization has since expanded to five other universities, the chapter at Central University was the largest chapter, boasting a roster of over fifty active members. Ethnographic and interview data was collected with this particular chapter. Based on observations the young men in this chapter were from a variety of class backgrounds, although the majority of them came from working class backgrounds. The group had a reputation for producing many of the campus's black male leaders as many of them went on to become presidents of fraternities and other campus groups, members of honor and academic societies, and high ranking members of the student senate. As UP members, these men hosted a variety of events, including weekly general body meetings, community service events, social events, their twentieth anniversary celebration, events with their sister organization, a new member process, and charitable events.

During the fall semester, UP conducted a new member education process in which [its existing] members, under the direction of two membership chairs, hosted a series of classes that were designed to teach incoming members how to become full-fledged members. UP's recruits were taught to become brothers with one another, how to run a campus organization, how to prepare for a job interview, and how to conduct oneself publicly—which included public speaking, dressing for the occasion, and avoiding the negative stereotypes that are often associated with black men. What is unique about this process is that it occurred in a racially homogenous space where UP's leaders taught the recruits how to act in racially diverse environments. These sessions lasted eight weeks in



the fall 2009 and six weeks in 2010, five nights a week, lasting on average two to four hours. I (the first author) was able to spend time with UP members as they introduced their official eleventh and twelfth generation of members. Although observations took place in a wide array of contexts, the data in this article comes primarily from this new member education process.

After speaking with the current chapter president in August 2009, I was granted permission to observe UP. I have attended over eighty of UP's events and am referred to by a handful of members as an honorary member. This status has allowed me to observe the group and voice my thoughts, in both public and private settings. I do think that part of the reason why I was granted uncensored access was my close proximity in age (mid-twenties), and my "role model position." As a young black man in a graduate school program, my status was an admirable one that some members respected. . . .

While conducting fieldwork I often jotted my notes in a spiral notebook. On a few occasions, when carrying a notebook was awkward (at banquets or community service events that took place outdoors for example) jottings were typed into my cell phone . . . I also conducted formal interviews with seventeen group members, [including many] who were most heavily involved in UP. . . . Respondents were asked to reflect on their college experiences, life before college, their career goals, and their involvement in UP. . . .

### Findings

Prior research suggests that black men avoid showing anger because they understand the negative reactions such displays may evoke within their white peers and coworkers (see Wingfield 2007, 2010). We find that in certain contexts black men were comfortable expressing feelings of anger, frustration, annoyance, and irritation. Specifically, UP's leaders embraced and displayed these emotions in backstage, all black, all male settings when they observed other black men, particularly their recruits, engaging in actions or behaviors that threatened

to reinforce certain stereotypes about black masculinity. . . . Below, we document key actions that elicited visible anger from black men in leadership roles in the UP organization.

### Enforcing Brotherhood

Although anger can be used to drive people apart, UP's leaders expressed anger in order to facilitate bonding among their recruits. During the new member education process the recruits struggled to come together on one accord, despite the encouragement from UP's leaders to come together as brothers. When the recruits failed to showcase the appropriate level of camaraderie, UP leaders often displayed anger, chastising recruits for their lack of brotherhood.

The concept of brotherhood was one of the most emphasized ideals group members stressed to incoming members. Brotherhood was particularly weighted given the stereotypes that black men are constantly involved in intraracial violence and pose a danger to one another. UP members worked to challenge this derogatory cultural image by highlighting the importance and necessity of black men getting along with one another. As Tyson, one of the membership chairs, stated in response to a question about why there was a process involved in becoming a member of UP,

The process is designed to help build brotherhood 'cause that's one of the stereotypes of black men; that we don't get along. That we run around shootin' and killin' each other. This helps build those bonds.

. . . Tyson later explained that getting along with other black men was essential to getting along with others:

You can't expect to function in the real world if you can't even get along with the next black man. How do you expect to get along with a white man? How do you expect to get along with an Asian man? How do you expect to get along with a group of females?



In this sense, not only did getting along with other black men become important for undermining stereotypes, brotherhood also became vital to make it in the "real world"—the world outside of one's same-race peers. As stereotypes of black men often depict them as potential threats (Collins 2004; Ferguson 2001), the ability to get along with different groups of people work to separate UP members from such negative images. For the men in UP, brotherhood was a tool to avoid becoming the stereotypical black man who fails to not only to get along with other black men, but who also fails to get along with anyone.

Given the importance placed on showing brotherhood to refute this stereotype, a surefire way to provoke anger from the more seasoned members was for recruits to undermine or fail to develop these necessary bonds. But taking a large group of strangers and expecting them to become "brothers" within a few weeks is no easy task. . . . In UP's case, the recruits would bicker and argue with one another on a regular basis, upsetting group leaders. For example, as part of their process the recruits were to hold an election for their executive board. But several of them failed to show, and those who were present spent much of the night arguing with each other and debating on the whereabouts of their missing comrades. Tyson commanded the room's attention, "Let me say something. . . . The purpose is to eradicate stereotypes. This is a stereotype. Arguing, fighting, I told y'all!"

As Tyson snapped the room fell silent. Ironically, in order to persuade the recruits to end their arguments and suppress their anger, Tyson displayed anger himself. Pointing out their visible lack of brotherhood, he once more drew upon the stereotype of black men who fail to get along,

You all got to show me brotherhood. All you all got to do is show me you all can come together. . . . And to get along with your fellow black man. You're all black men, come on get it together! This is how white people look at us!

Anger was often displayed backstage in order to promote togetherness among the recruits when in the front stage. Aware of the consequences their discord could have outside of the closed doors of UP, Tyson responded with anger in hopes that the recruits would understand the importance of getting along with each other. As controlling images work to shape the views others may have of them as black men (Collins 2004), UP leaders wanted recruits to understand the importance of their public presentations. When the recruits failed to do so, UP leaders responded with anger and criticism in order to promote public displays of brotherhood.

Throughout the early stages of the new member process, recruits continued to find ways to argue with each other and failed to showcase the desired amount of brotherhood UP members expected. During one intense night the recruits continued to point fingers and blame one another for their group shortcomings, instead of coming together to seek a solution. This was especially troublesome on this particular night because instead of meeting in front of the two membership chairs and a handful of UP members, the recruits were arguing in front of several members of UP—an organization of which they were not yet members. Shannon, a fiery and charismatic alumni member, addressed the young men with his usual intensity, urging them to present a more united front,

When y'all have problems, make sure they handled behind closed doors. . . . If Kendrick [fellow UP member and current membership co-chair] tells me the grass is blue, then I'm going to tell everybody else that the grass is blue! And then, later on, when me and Kendrick alone, I'm gonna say, 'Kendrick, the grass isn't blue. . . .' He barks his final advice, 'Stop talking about y'all problems and get to the solutions!'

Shannon angrily informs them that true brotherhood does not lend itself to public displays of disharmony. As brothers, they should publicly defend each other while on the front stage, and handle their disagreements backstage. . . .



Brotherhood was so important to UP members that one recruit's lack of unity often served as a teachable moment for all of the recruits. Several UP leaders were upset with the recruits as they continued to publicly oust one another and failed to offer their support as needed. One evening it came to light that one of the recruits had forged a signature on a required document. In acknowledging the severe mistake he made, Harold offered his fellow recruits an apology, "Can y'all still trust me?" As expected most of the recruits accepted his apology ("Yeah man it's a mistake," "We still got your back," "We trust you."). Despite the outpouring of support from the group, one recruit went against the grain and voiced his disagreement, "I can't trust you anymore. You messed up." By not accepting this apology the member failed to show UP members his brotherhood. The lack of support and brotherhood angered UP members, including Shannon who had just spoken to the recruits the night prior about standing by one's brother when in public. Instead of saving his lecture for the recruit who failed to accept Harold's apology, he tore into all of the recruits,

When UP come around, y'all better be on point! If you are all about brotherhood, y'all don't put anybody down in front of somebody you tryin' to impress! Y'all should come first! You don't down your brothers in front of people you are trying to impress. . . Even if you didn't approve of Harold's actions, when UP is here, you just go along with brotherhood. You let them know it's good. But then you go off somewhere else private and you tell Harold that you don't approve of his actions. And then you handle it however you best see fit *then!* But in front of other people you are trying to impress, you don't do that.

. . . UP leaders' anger was aimed at enforcing brotherhood in order to challenge the stereotype of disharmony among black men. Discord among black men is believed to lead towards violent relationships with other black men. Publicly this leads to increased media scrutiny and sensationalism

that confirms negative preconceived notions of black men. To combat harmful images, the UP leaders stressed brotherhood to their recruits, using anger while backstage to reduce the hostility that existed between the recruits. In turn, the recruits were expected to be of one accord when in the presence of others, or in front stage settings. In this case, then, black men are comfortable showing anger in backstage settings when they are confronted with divisive behavior that they view as negating brotherhood and reinforcing adverse cultural images of black masculinity. Being angry in this backstage environment serves to encourage a type of black masculinity that is more respectable, nonstereotyped, and appropriate for front stage, interracial contexts.

#### Policing Unprofessionalism

. . . UP leaders frequently encouraged their recruits to avoid front stage displays that reflected the derogatory images the men of UP were trying to discourage. Leaders stressed that recruits should display a professional demeanor at all times. Failure to do this elicited leaders' ire and generated expressions of anger in backstage and private UP meetings. For instance, at one point the recruits were responsible for volunteering during the university's Parents' Weekend. Somehow the current UP president, Terrell, heard that the recruits were disrespectful during their volunteer time. Upset and embarrassed, Terrell decided to address these rumors during one of the recruits' new member sessions. As he was known for his composed and personable demeanor, he spoke calmly but the recruits quickly recognized the anger and seriousness in his voice,

One thing UP does is act professional...when I get feedback that y'all were talking and had to be told to be quiet. . . . We're uplifting, that's our name . . . all I want to hear is "they did a great job, thank you."

The recruits sat silently. As incoming members of UP, Terrell expected the recruits to act in the same manner as full-fledged members—in a manner that



would earn the respect of outsiders. Terrell's decision to disparage the recruits' behavior may have been amplified by the fact that Central University is a predominantly white university; so whatever behavior the recruits were flaunting was visible to large groups of white parents. Unprofessional behavior, then, was performed on a front stage where white students and their parents would have comprised the audience for such acts. Regardless, both UP and the incoming members were expected to be on their best behavior when in the front stage. UP leaders often defined this as maintaining a professional, formalized demeanor. Research has documented instances where blacks work to present themselves exactly in order to avoid being associated with stereotypes (Feagin and Sikes 1995; Lacy 2007). But when the recruits failed to do so, UP leaders were quick to meet such behaviors with anger in order to promote more polished behaviors.

UP leaders used a variety of strategies to guide the recruits into adopting professional behaviors, including classroom-like presentations and simply leading by example. Yet after several attempts at teaching the recruits how to conduct themselves, the [leaders found that] recruits often had a difficult time taking on certain behaviors. Frustrated at their stubbornness, Tyson decided to implement new rules, in hopes of getting the recruits to behave more accordingly. In a calm, yet clearly irritated voice he instructed them,

From now on, we got to be professional at all times. "Mr. whatever your last name is," that's how we talk to each other. No more "what's up bro, what's up dog," no more daps [expressive handshakes]. Handshakes with a firm grip . . . [loud sigh] This makes me sad, black people, man we can't even get it together.

In addition to the irritation in his voice, Tyson emphasized his frustration with the recruits by stating that their behavior made him "sad," possibly adding to the recruits' humiliation. Furthermore, by emphasizing professionalism and instructing the group that black slang and creative handshakes were no longer permissible, he was calling an end

to behaviors that are frequently associated with young black men. The stereotypical young black male behavior was not seen as ideal for the type of masculinity the men of UP were trying to get the recruits to perform; it was not "professional," nor did it undermine the predominant images of black men (Feagin and Sikes 1995; Lacy 2007). . . .

Notably, unprofessional behavior made the men of UP angry in part because they considered it behavior that was appropriate for "niggas," not the men of UP. For the UP members the label "nigga" was equated with the stereotypical unprofessional black man from the inner city. Members of UP would frequently become annoyed with, criticize, and shame recruits for acting like niggas. For example, the recruits often had problems getting their entire group to show up at their new member sessions, and when members did not show, those who were present were responsible for reporting the whereabouts of their absent brothers. Fed up with the ongoing excuses about the recruits' absences, Wiz, a feared and respected alumni member, told the recruits of a past recruit who was able to make it to the meetings despite being age thirty-two at the time, having a child who would accompany him to sessions, and being an engineering major. In spite of these extenuating circumstances, Wiz explained,

But he was still here. . . . Y'all black men in college. But niggas always got excuses. . . . Do this one thing for me. Be men. Men stand by their word.

. . . Wiz's (and other group leaders') angry use of the term "nigga" here is very significant. This term has a controversial history and continues to generate debate and discussion about its appropriateness, suitability, and implications in a modern "postracial" climate (see for instance Picca and Feagin 2007). In this context, Wiz and other UP leaders use it as a derogatory term intended to evoke stereotypes about black male irresponsibility . . . [and] to draw a distinction between stereotypical black men and the more respectable, professional, responsible black men that they consider suited for UP membership. . . .



UP leaders would often use the backstage to help recruits and other group members give a front stage performance that would help them in professional settings. As young black men with middle class aspirations they were very much concerned with professional front stage presentations. As such, leaders would often become angry and criticize recruits when they acted unprofessionally, or like “niggas.” This label referred to the controlling images (Collins 2004) of working class inner-city black men who were often labeled as thugs. UP members worked hard to try to avoid such characterizations. Consequently, angrily admonishing recruits not to act like “niggas” while backstage served to motivate recruits into adopting a certain set of behaviors for the front stage interracial environments that they would have to navigate.

Becoming professional men also included downplaying anger and presenting an appearance of humbleness. This trait is counter to the cool persona often associated with black men (Anderson 1999; Majors and Billson 1992). While black boys in the street are often encouraged to present themselves as flashy, tough, and prideful, UP leaders sought out a more restrained appearance for their recruits. During the recruits’ process, several UP members quickly recognized that the current class of recruits were quick to anger and failed to show the appropriate amount of humility. During one particular new member session tempers flared as UP members continued to criticize the recruits for quickly angering and thus embodying the stereotype of the angry black man. The recruits’ continued anger led to UP members returning the anger. The next night Ahmad, one of the membership chairs, decided to address the prior night’s events and urged the recruits to humble themselves, “Can anybody tell me what they think it takes to be an uplifting black man?” After a few of the recruits spoke up, Ahmad acknowledged their replies but insisted that something was missing,

I didn’t hear humility . . . in order to be an uplifting black man, you have to be humble. Sometimes you

gotta take that L [meaning “loss”, as in “win some, lose some”]. . . .

Ahmad, known for his laid-back persona, spoke to them in a deliberate, serious tone as the recruits sat blank-faced and ashamed. Ahmad stressed to the room of recruits that sometimes returning anger was not an appropriate response—sometimes they would have to

“take that L,” and grin it and bear it . . . can’t act like niggas. . . . People still see us as niggas. . . . Last night I saw clenched fists, talking back to my bruhs,<sup>1</sup> which hurt me . . . but you gotta be humble.

. . . Goffman (1959) writes that subordinate groups may plan their performances in the backstage. Other researchers who study behaviors and performance among the black middle class note that men in this group may employ particular strategies to differentiate themselves from the deleterious stereotypes associated with black working-class men (Frazier 1957). This study indicates that emotional performance becomes a strategy to help black middle-class men emphasize the importance and necessity of avoiding these negative cultural images. For these young black men, the backstage became a place where emotions like anger that must be hidden on the front stage could be deployed as a strategy for resisting oppressive stereotypes and racial inequality. Anger, then, was intended to steer younger black men towards a more desirable form of black masculinity that would be respected in professional settings. . . . [A]way from the view of others, UP members felt at ease displaying anger in order to promote brotherhood and professional behaviors among their recruits. In other words, UP leaders were comfortable embodying some aspects of a stereotype backstage in order to discourage stereotypical behaviors in the front stage.

#### Note

1. Bruh(s) is a term UP members use that means brother(s).



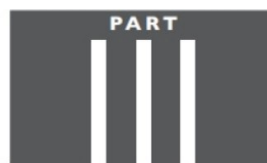
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## Reflective Questions

1. What is the cultural stereotype of the "angry black man" in the United States? What are the key sources of this stereotype? How does it affect the emotional expressions of black men, particularly in predominantly white social settings?
2. How and why did the leaders of Uplift and Progress (UP) express emotions differently in backstage and front-stage regions at Central University? What were their aims when displaying anger? What were the two key feeling rules of UP? How was anger used to reinforce these rules with recruits?
3. Why was this article entitled "Getting Angry to Get Ahead?" How did anger enable the members of UP to learn how to act "professionally"? What did the label "nigga" mean among UP members? How was this label used to shame recruits? When and why were recruits "angrily admonished not to act like niggas"?
4. Why did UP leaders place such a strong emphasis on the ideal of brotherhood? What organizational feeling rules were linked to this ideal? Would these feeling rules have been different if Central University had a predominantly black student population? Why or why not?
5. Go to YouTube and watch the comedians Key and Peele do one of their impressions of Barack Obama. What emotion do they suggest President Obama is concealing when he addresses journalists or the public? Based on the insights offered by this article, how could you explain the "cool and calm" demeanor President Obama typically adopts? Does Uplift and Progress encourage its members to manage their emotional displays in the same ways that President Obama does?





# The Social Construction of the Body and Embodiment

The selections in Part II examined how social meanings and expectations profoundly influence people's "inner" experiences, including their perceptions, emotions, and bodily sensations. While we often think of these experiences as originating in our bodies and thus as biological, they arise out of our interactions and are shaped by the groups to which we belong. Through our interactions in these groups, we learn a set of expectations about how we should think and feel, and how we should express those thoughts and feelings in various situations. We also learn what social meanings are attached to our bodies and how we should adorn, present, and control them so that they convey those meanings. These meanings are not natural outcomes of the size, shape, color, or sex of our bodies. Instead, they are results of socially created beliefs about the nature of gender, race, power, health, and sexuality.

The selections in Part III examine how these ideas become incorporated into our bodies and bodily practices, particularly through language, symbols, and socialization processes. More specifically, they illustrate the following points:

- *Culture becomes inscribed or written onto our bodies.* From the moment of birth (and even while we are in the womb), our bodies are imbued with social



meanings, such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and kinship. These meanings shape the relationships we experience, the appearances we present, and the identities we enact. Moreover, from the moment of birth, we learn how to embody social roles and expectations. For instance, we learn how we should look, feel, and act as girls or boys, particularly in the context of our family, neighborhood, and culture. As Karin Martin illustrates in Selection 11, we also learn how we should “do gender” in our bodily practices.

Martin portrays how preschool teachers subject young girls and boys to a variety of bodily “disciplines,” instructing them in prevailing cultural and gender expectations about how to dress, use space, control their voices, and manage their bodies when in formal settings or when involved in play. As Martin points out, children do not simply or effortlessly acquire and embody these gender disciplines. Instead, they occasionally ignore, resist, or subvert them. These expressions of resistance, Martin argues, demonstrate that gendered expressions of bodily practice are not “natural,” even though they take on that appearance. The gender differences we see manifested in girls’ and boys’ physical conduct, such as their movements, gestures, and postures, are learned through socialization and the bodily disciplines it promotes. These gender-related behavioral differences only seem natural because they are re-enacted so often in everyday practices and interactions.

- *Culture also informs and influences our bodily experiences through language, both through what gets named and what goes unnamed or unspoken.* As Selection 12 illustrates, the bodily experiences of women are powerfully “disciplined” by the fact that larger cultural discourses erase the reality of the clitoris, or at least keep it symbolically “under the hood.” When failing to name or speak of the clitoris, prevailing sexual discourses foster conditions that make it more difficult for women to know their bodies, to discover a key source of sexual sensation, and to experience sexual pleasure most fully.
- *Yet people are active agents in formulating their responses to cultural directives and bodily experiences.* We do not simply internalize and abide by social expectations. Nor do we simply react to bodily sensations. Instead, we actively interpret and make sense of these sensations, drawing upon prominent social meanings and cultural discourses but also holding them up against our bodily experiences. As Waskul, Vannini, and Wiesen conclude, we are not “cultural dupes” as we interpret and respond to our bodily sensations. We reflexively “make meaning of [our] body and its sensual experiences.” In turn, we have the capacity to exercise some elements of choice and autonomy as we determine what these experiences mean and how they should influence



our actions. We can and do contest the meanings attached to our bodies, as Selection 13, on corporate logo tattoos, and Selection 14, on taking ADHD medication, make clear.

- *While we have the ability to exercise some autonomy in responding to bodily sensations and in fashioning our bodily appearances and practices, we are not necessarily exercising as much freedom as we think.* In contemporary Western societies the meanings we attach to our bodies are profoundly influenced by the cultural industries and the rapidly expanding commodification of culture. Thus, even when we challenge dominant bodily norms or mark our bodies with what we regard as symbols of rebellion, we often draw upon bodily practices, corporate symbols, and medications which are more reflective of consumer capitalism than individual freedom. While the culture and medical industries tell us that we can manage, medicate, or adorn our bodies in ways that allow us to express unique or idealized features of ourselves, we need to be wary of their claims. For instance, when branding ourselves with their logo, we can find ourselves trapped within the logic and constraints of consumer capitalism. That is, rather than conveying our individuality through marking our body with this logo, we may actually be signifying that we have joined a corporate tribe and bought the lifestyle and identity it sells. When taking medications, we must grapple with the socially informed physical ramifications of the medicine—and the consequences for our senses of self.

Taken together, the selections in Part III offer compelling empirical examples of how we learn to embody gender, culture, sex, and power. They also demonstrate the subtle, explicit, and often unrecognized ways that we regulate and manage our bodies as we negotiate what it means to be a gendered, ethnic, sexual, fashionable, high-achieving, and “self-expressive” person. In addressing these themes, the selections illustrate how the natural and social are co-constructed realities. The body and society are inextricably intertwined.



## Becoming a Gendered Body

KARIN A. MARTIN

*Girls and boys don't naturally end up with gendered bodies or identities. Rather, concerted care goes into making girls and boys different. Even before birth, some parents hold pink or blue "gender reveal" parties to announce the sex of a child so that they and others can align names, nurseries, and gifts to gendered expectations. At birth, infants are immediately identified as male or female. From that time forward, caretakers commonly give gendered names, dress their babies in skirts or pants, and purchase dolls for one but action figures for another.*

*Children learn to place people into the socially appropriate categories based on perceptible differences in appearance—differences that are created through grooming, dress, posture, and other forms of behavior. By the time they are toddlers, children themselves take on sex classification: they learn that people belong to discrete categories like "mommies" and "daddies," "boys" and "girls," and "women" and "men." When children enter what Mead called the play stage of development, they begin to play at being these different kinds of gendered people, commonly drawing on socially appropriate costumes, roles, gestures, and lines of conduct when doing so. Others' responses to this role playing and corresponding appearance inform children that no matter how they dress or act they cannot escape their socially ascribed sex. Children consequently usually adopt these attitudes*

*of others toward themselves and embrace their socially bestowed gender identity as their own. In this process, children learn how to "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987)—that is, they learn how to embody and enact it in their everyday interactions.*

*This selection by Karin A. Martin describes the routine interactional processes through which preschools not only "discipline" the bodies of children but also instruct and encourage them to do gender. These processes include regulating how preschoolers dress, use space, engage in formal and relaxed behaviors, physically interact with others, and use their voices. Martin's research thus provides an empirical illustration of how gender, like any system of classification, is socially constructed and enacted. It also portrays how gender identity, like other dimensions of the self, arises in and through social experience.*

**S**ocial science research about bodies often focuses on women's bodies, particularly the parts of women's bodies that are most explicitly different from men's—their reproductive capacities and sexuality (E. Martin 1987; K. Martin 1996; but see Connell 1987, 1995). Men and women in the United States also hold and move their bodies differently (Birdwhistell 1970; Henley 1977; Young 1990); these differences are sometimes related to sexuality (Haug 1987) and sometimes not. On the whole,

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men and women sit, stand, gesture, walk, and throw differently. Generally, women's bodies are confined, their movements restricted. For example, women take smaller steps than men, sit in closed positions (arms and legs crossed across the body), take up less physical space than men, do not step, twist, or throw from the shoulder when throwing a ball, and are generally tentative when using their bodies (Birdwhistell 1970; Henley 1977; Young 1990). Some of these differences, particularly differences in motor skills (e.g., jumping, running, throwing) are seen in early childhood (Thomas and French 1985). Of course, within gender, we may find individual differences, differences based on race, class, and sexuality, and differences based on size and shape of body. Yet, on average, men and women move differently.

Such differences may seem trivial in the large scheme of gender inequality. However, theoretical work by social scientists and feminists suggests that these differences may be consequential. Bodies are (unfinished) resources (Shilling 1993: 103) that must be "trained, manipulated, cajoled, coaxed, organized and in general disciplined" (Turner 1992: 15). We use our bodies to construct our means of living, to take care of each other, to pleasure each other. According to Turner, "... social life depends upon the successful presenting, monitoring and interpreting of bodies" (p. 15). Similarly, according to Foucault (1979), controlled and disciplined bodies do more than regulate the individual body. A disciplined body creates a context for social relations. Gendered (along with "raced" and "classed") bodies create particular contexts for social relations as they signal, manage, and negotiate information about power and status. Gender relations depend on the successful gender presentation, monitoring, and interpretation of bodies (West and Zimmerman 1987). Bodies that clearly delineate gender status facilitate the maintenance of the gender hierarchy.

Our bodies are also one *site* of gender. Much postmodern feminist work (Butler 1990, 1993) suggests that gender is a performance. Microsociological work (West and Zimmerman 1987) suggests that

gender is something that is "done." These two concepts, "gender performance" and "doing gender," are similar—both suggest that managed, adorned, fashioned, properly comported and moving bodies establish gender and gender relations.

Other feminist theorists (Connell 1987, 1995; Young 1990) argue that gender rests not only on the surface of the body, in performance and doing, but becomes *embodied*—becomes deeply part of whom we are physically and psychologically. According to Connell, gender becomes embedded in body postures, musculature, and tensions in our bodies.

The social definition of men as holders of power is translated not only into mental body-images and fantasies, but into muscle tensions, posture, the feel and texture of the body. This is one of the main ways in which the power of men becomes naturalized. . . . (Connell 1987: 85)

Connell (1995) suggests that masculine gender is partly a feel to one's body and that bodies are often a source of power for men. Young (1990), however, argues that bodies serve the opposite purpose for women—women's bodies are often sources of anxiety and tentativeness. She suggests that women's lack of confidence and agency are embodied and stem from an inability to move confidently in space, to take up space, to use one's body to its fullest extent. Young (1990) suggests "that the general lack of confidence that we [women] frequently have about our cognitive or leadership abilities is traceable in part to an original doubt of our body's capacity" (p. 156). Thus, these theorists suggest that gender differences in minute bodily behaviors like gesture, stance, posture, step, and throwing are significant to our understanding of gendered selves and gender inequality. This feminist theory, however, focuses on adult bodies.

Theories of the body need gendering, and feminist theories of gendered bodies need "childrening" or accounts of development. How do adult gendered bodies become gendered, if they are not naturally so? Scholars run the risk of continuing



to view gendered bodies as natural if they ignore the processes that produce gendered adult bodies. Gendering of the body in childhood is the foundation on which further gendering of the body occurs throughout the life course. The gendering of children's bodies makes gender differences feel and appear natural, which allows for such bodily differences to emerge throughout the life course.

I suggest that the hidden school curriculum of disciplining the body is gendered and contributes to the embodiment of gender in childhood, making gendered bodies appear and feel natural. Sociologists of education have demonstrated that schools have hidden curriculums (Giroux and Purpel 1983; Jackson 1968). Hidden curriculums are covert lessons that schools teach, and they are often a means of social control. These curriculums include teaching about work differentially by class (Anyon 1980; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Carnoy and Levin 1985), political socialization (Wasburn 1986), and training in obedience and docility (Giroux and Purpel 1983). More recently, some theorists and researchers have examined the curriculum that disciplines the body (Carere 1987; Foucault 1979; McLaren 1986). This curriculum demands the practice of bodily control in congruence with the goals of the school as an institution. It reworks the students from the outside in on the presumption that to shape the body is to shape the mind (Carere 1987). In such a curriculum teachers constantly monitor kids' bodily movements, comportment, and practices. Kids begin their day running wildly about the school grounds. Then this hidden curriculum funnels the kids into line, through the hallways, quietly into a classroom, sitting upright at their desks, focused at the front of the room, "ready to learn" (Carere 1987; McLaren 1986). According to Carere (1987), this curriculum of disciplining the body serves the curriculums that seek to shape the mind and renders children physically ready for cognitive learning.

I suggest that this hidden curriculum that controls children's bodily practices serves also to turn kids who are similar in bodily comportment, movement, and practice into girls and boys, children

whose bodily practices are different. Schools are not the only producers of these differences. While the process ordinarily begins in the family, the schools' hidden curriculum further facilitates and encourages the construction of bodily differences between the genders and makes these physical differences appear and feel natural. Finally, this curriculum may be more or less hidden depending on the particular preschool and particular teachers. Some schools and teachers may see teaching children to behave like "young ladies" and "young gentlemen" as an explicit part of their curriculums.

### Data and Method

The data for this study come from extensive and detailed semistructured field observations of five preschool classrooms of three to five-year-olds in a midwestern city. Four of the classrooms were part of a preschool (Preschool A) located close to the campus of a large university. A few of the kids were children of faculty members, more were children of staff and administrators, and many were not associated with the university. Many of the kids who attended Preschool A attended part-time. Although teachers at this school paid some attention to issues of race and gender equity, issues of diversity were not as large a part of the curriculum as they are at some preschools (Jordan and Cowan 1995; Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996). The fifth classroom was located at Preschool B, a preschool run by a Catholic church in the same city as Preschool A. The kids who attended Preschool B were children of young working professionals, many of whom lived in the vicinity of the preschool. These children attended preschool "full-time"—five days a week for most of the day. . . .

A total of 112 children and 14 different teachers (five head teachers and nine aides) were observed in these classrooms.<sup>1</sup> All teachers were female. Forty-two percent of the kids were girls and 58 percent were boys, and they made up similar proportions in each classroom. There were 12 Asian or Asian American children, 3 Latino/a children, and 4 African American children. The remaining



children were white. The children primarily came from middle-class families.

A research assistant and I observed in these classrooms about three times a week for eight months. Our observations were as unobtrusive as possible and we interacted little with the kids. . . .

We focused on the children's physicality—body movement, use of space, and the physical contact among kids or between kids and teachers. Our field notes were usually not about "events" that occurred, but about everyday physical behavior and interaction and its regulation. Field notes were coded using the qualitative software program Hyper-Research. Categories that were coded emerged from the data and were not predetermined categories. Excerpts from field notes are presented throughout and are examples of representative patterns in the data. Tables presenting estimates of the numbers of times particular phenomena were observed provide a context for the field note excerpts. . . .

### Results

Children's bodies are disciplined by schools. Children are physically active, and institutions like schools impose disciplinary controls that regulate children's bodies and prepare children for the larger social world. While this disciplinary control produces docile bodies (Foucault 1979), it also produces gendered bodies. As these disciplinary practices operate in different contexts, some bodies become more docile than others. I examine how the following practices contribute to a gendering of children's bodies in preschool: the effects of dressing-up or bodily adornment, the gendered nature of formal and relaxed behaviors, how the different restrictions on girls' and boys' voices limit their physicality, how teachers instruct girls' and boys' bodies, and the gendering of physical interactions between children and teachers and among the children themselves.

#### Bodily Adornment: Dressing Up

Perhaps the most explicit way that children's bodies become gendered is through their clothes and other

bodily adornments. Here I discuss how parents gender their children through their clothes, how children's dress-up play experiments with making bodies feminine and masculine, and how this play, when it is gender normative, shapes girls' and boys' bodies differently, constraining girls' physicality.

#### *Dressing Up (1)*

The clothes that parents send kids to preschool in shape children's experiences of their bodies in gendered ways.<sup>2</sup> Clothes, particularly their color, signify a child's gender; gender in preschool is in fact color-coded. On average, about 61 percent of the girls wore pink clothing each day (Table 1). Boys were more likely to wear primary colors, black, fluorescent green, and orange. Boys never wore pink.

The teacher is asking each kid during circle (the part of the day that includes formal instruction by the teacher while the children sit in a circle) what their favorite color is. Adam says black. Bill says "every color that's not pink." (Five-year-olds)

Fourteen percent of three-year-old girls wore dresses each day compared to 32 percent of five-year-old girls (Table 1). Wearing a dress limited girls' physicality in preschool. However, it is not only the dress itself, but knowledge about how to behave in a dress that is restrictive. Many girls

**Table 1 Observations of Girls Wearing Dresses and the Color Pink; Five Preschool Classrooms**

Observation	N	Percent
Girls wearing something pink	54	61
Girls wearing dresses	21	24
3-year-old girls	6	14
5-year-old girls	15	32
Number of observations	89	100
3-year-old girls	42	47
5-year-old girls	47	53

Note: In 12 observation sessions, what the children were wearing, including color of their clothing, was noted. The data in Table 1 come from coded field notes. There were no instances of boys wearing pink or dresses, and no age differences among girls in wearing the color pink.



already knew that some behaviors were not allowed in a dress. This knowledge probably comes from the families who dress their girls in dresses.

Vicki, wearing leggings and a dress-like shirt, is leaning over the desk to look into a "tunnel" that some other kids have built. As she leans, her dress/shirt rides up exposing her back. Jennifer (another child) walks by Vicki and as she does she pulls Vicki's shirt back over her bare skin and gives it a pat to keep it in place. It looks very much like something one's mother might do. (Five-year-olds)

Four girls are sitting at a table—Cathy, Kim, Danielle, and Jesse. They are cutting play money out of paper. Cathy and Danielle have on overalls and Kim and Jesse have on dresses. Cathy puts her feet up on the table and crosses her legs at the ankle; she leans back in her chair and continues cutting her money. Danielle imitates her. They look at each other and laugh. They put their shoulders back, posturing, having fun with this new way of sitting. Kim and Jesse continue to cut and laugh with them, but do not put their feet up. (Five-year-olds)

Dresses are restrictive in other ways as well. They often are worn with tights that are experienced as uncomfortable and constraining. I observed girls constantly pulling at and rearranging their tights, trying to untwist them or pull them up. Because of their discomfort, girls spent much time attuned to and arranging their clothing and/or their bodies.

Dresses also can be lifted up, an embarrassing thing for five-year-olds if done purposely by another child. We witnessed this on only one occasion—a boy pulled up the hem of a girl's skirt up. The girl protested and the teacher told him to stop and that was the end of it. Teachers, however, lifted up girls' dresses frequently—to see if a child was dressed warmly enough, while reading a book about dresses, to see if a child was wet. Usually this was done without asking the child and was more management of the child rather than an interaction with her. Teachers were much more likely to manage girls and their clothing this way—rearranging their clothes, tucking in their

shirts, fixing a ponytail gone astray. Such management often puts girls' bodies under the control of another and calls girls' attentions to their appearances and bodily adornments.

#### *Dressing Up (2)*

Kids like to *play* dress-up in preschool, and all the classrooms had a dress-up corner with a variety of clothes, shoes, pocketbooks, scarves, and hats for dressing up. Classrooms tended to have more women's clothes than men's, but there were some of both, as well as some gender-neutral clothes—capas, hats, and vests that were not clearly for men or women—and some items that were clearly costumes, such as masks of cats and dogs and clip-on tails. Girls tended to play dress-up more than boys—over one-half of dressing up was done by girls. Gender differences in the amount of time spent playing dress-up seemed to increase from age three to age five. We only observed the five-year-old boys dressing up or using clothes or costumes in their play three times, whereas three-year-old boys dressed up almost weekly. Five-year-old boys also did not dress up elaborately, but used one piece of clothing to animate their play. Once Phil wore large, men's winter ski gloves when he played monster. Holding up his now large, chiseled looking hands, he stomped around the classroom making monster sounds. On another occasion Brian, a child new to the classroom who attended only two days a week, walked around by himself for a long time carrying a silver pocketbook and hovering first at the edges of girls' play and then at the edges of boys' play. On the third occasion, Sam used ballet slippers to animate his play in circle.

When kids dressed up, they played at being a variety of things from kitty cats and puppies to monsters and superheroes to "fancy ladies." Some of this play was not explicitly gendered. For example, one day in November I observed three girls wearing "turkey hats" they had made. They spent a long time gobbling at each other and playing at being turkeys, but there was nothing explicitly gendered about their play. However, this kind of adornment



was not the most frequent type. Children often seemed to experiment with both genders when they played dress-up. The three-year-olds tended to be more experimental in their gender dress-up than the five-year-olds, perhaps because teachers encouraged it more at this age.

Everett and Juan are playing dress-up. Both have on "dresses" made out of material that is wrapped around them like a toga or sarong. Everett has a pocketbook and a camera over his shoulder and Juan has a pair of play binoculars on a strap over his. Everett has a scarf around his head and cape on. Juan has on big, green sunglasses. Pam (teacher) tells them, "You guys look great! Go look in the mirror." They shuffle over to the full-length mirror and look at themselves and grin, and make adjustments to their costumes. (Three-year-olds)

The five-year-old children tended to dress-up more gender normatively. Girls in particular played at being adult women.

Frances is playing dress-up. She is walking in red shoes and carrying a pocketbook. She and two other girls, Jen and Rachel, spend between five and ten minutes looking at and talking about the guinea pigs. Then they go back to dress-up: Frances and Rachel practice walking in adult women's shoes. Their body movements are not a perfect imitation of an adult woman's walk in high heels, yet it does look like an attempt to imitate such a walk. Jen and Rachel go back to the guinea pigs, and Frances, now by herself, is turning a sheer, frilly lavender shirt around and around and around trying to figure out how to put it on. She gets it on and looks at herself in the mirror. She adds a sheer pink and lavender scarf and pink shoes. Looks in the mirror again. She walks, twisting her body—shoulders, hips, shoulders, hips—not quite a (stereotypic) feminine walk, but close. Walking in big shoes makes her take little bitty steps, like walking in heels. She shuffles in the too big shoes out into the middle of the classroom and stops by a teacher. Laura (a teacher) says, "Don't you look fancy, all pink and purple." Frances smiles up at

her and walks off, not twisting so much this time. She goes back to the mirror and adds a red scarf. She looks in the mirror and is holding her arms across her chest to hold the scarf on (she can't tie it) and she is holding it with her chin too. She shuffles to block area where Jen is and then takes the clothes off and puts them back in dress-up area. (Five-year-olds)

I observed not only the children who dressed up, but the reactions of those around them to their dress. This aspect proved to be one of the most interesting parts of kids' dress-up play. Children interpreted each others' bodily adornments as gendered, even when other interpretations were plausible. For instance, one day just before Halloween, Kim dressed up and was "scary" because she was dressed as a woman:

Kim has worn a denim skirt and tights to school today. Now she is trying to pull on a ballerina costume—pink and ruffy—over her clothes. She has a hard time getting it on. It's tight and wrinkled up and twisted when she gets it on. Her own clothes are bunched up under it. Then she puts on a mask—a woman's face. The mask material itself is a clear plastic so that skin shows through, but is sculpted to have a very Anglo nose and high cheek bones. It also has thin eyebrows, blue eye shadow, blush, and lipstick painted on it. The mask is bigger than Kim's face and head. Kim looks at herself in the mirror and spends the rest of the play time with this costume on. Intermittently she picks up a plastic pumpkin since it is Halloween season and carries that around too. Kim walks around the classroom for a long time and then runs through the block area wearing this costume. Jason yells, "Ugh! There's a woman!" He and the other boys playing blocks shriek and scatter about the block area. Kim runs back to the dress-up area as they yell. Then throughout the afternoon she walks and skips through the center of the classroom, and every time she comes near the block boys one of them yells, "Ugh, there's the woman again!" The teacher even picks up on this and says to Kim twice, "Woman, slow down." (Five-year-olds)



The boys' shrieks indicated that Kim was scary, and this scariness is linked in their comments about her being a woman. It seems equally plausible that they could have interpreted her scary dress as a "trick-o-treater," given that it was close to Halloween and she was carrying a plastic pumpkin that kids collect candy in, or that they might have labeled her a dancer or ballerina because she was wearing a tutu. Rather, her scary dress-up was coded for her by others as "woman."

Other types of responses to girls dressing up also seemed to gender their bodies and to constrain them. For example, on two occasions I saw a teacher tie the arms of girls' dress-up shirts together so that the girls could not move their arms. They did this in fun, of course, and untied them as soon as the girls wanted them to, but I never witnessed this constraining of boys' bodies in play.

Thus, how parents gender children's bodies through dressing them and the ways children experiment with bodily adornments by dressing up make girls' and boys' bodies different and seem different to those around them. Adorning a body often genders it explicitly—signifies that it is a feminine or masculine body. Adornments also make girls' movements smaller, leading girls to take up less space with their bodies and disallowing some types of movements.

#### Formal and Relaxed Behaviors

Describing adults, Goffman (1959) defines front stage and backstage behavior:

The backstage language consists of reciprocal first-naming, co-operative decision making, profanity, open sexual remarks, elaborate griping, smoking, rough informal dress, "sloppy" sitting and standing posture, use of dialect or substandard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressivity and "kidding," inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts, minor physical self-involvements such as humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching, and flatulence. The front stage behavior language can be taken as the absence (and in some sense the opposite) of this. (p. 128)

Thus, one might not expect much front stage or formal behavior in preschool, and often, especially during parents' drop-off and pick-up time, this was the case. But a given region of social life may sometimes be a backstage and sometimes a front stage. I identified several behaviors that were expected by the teachers, required by the institution, or that would be required in many institutional settings, as formal behavior. Raising one's hand, sitting "on your bottom" (not on your knees, not squatting, not lying down, not standing) during circle, covering one's nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, or sitting upright in a chair are all formal behaviors of preschools, schools, and to some extent the larger social world. Crawling on the floor, yelling, lying down during teachers' presentations, and running through the classroom are examples of relaxed behaviors that are not allowed in preschool, schools, work settings, and many institutions of the larger social world (Henley 1977). Not all behaviors fell into one of these classifications. When kids were actively engaged in playing at the water table, for example, much of their behavior was not clearly formal or relaxed. I coded as formal and relaxed behaviors those behaviors that would be seen as such if done by adults (or children in many cases) in other social institutions for which children are being prepared.

In the classrooms in this study, boys were allowed and encouraged to pursue relaxed behaviors in a variety of ways that girls were not. Girls were more likely to be encouraged to pursue more formal behaviors. Eighty-two percent of all formal behaviors observed in these classrooms were done by girls, and only 18 percent by boys. However, 80 percent of the behaviors coded as relaxed were boys' behaviors (Table 2).

These observations do not tell us *why* boys do more relaxed behaviors and girls do more formal behaviors. Certainly many parents and others would argue that boys are more predisposed to sloppy postures, crawling on the floor, and so on. However, my observations suggest that teachers help construct this gender difference in bodily



**Table 2 Observations of Formal and Relaxed Behaviors, by Gender of Child: Five Preschool Classrooms**

Type of Behavior	Boys		Girls		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Formal	16	18	71	82	87	100
Relaxed	86	80	21	20	107	100

Note: Structured/formal behaviors were coded from references in the field notes to formal postures, polite gestures, etc. Relaxed/informal behaviors were coded from references to informal postures, backstage demeanors, etc.

behaviors.<sup>9</sup> Teachers were more likely to reprimand girls for relaxed bodily movements and comportment. Sadker and Sadker (1994) found a similar result with respect to hand-raising for answering teachers' questions—if hand-raising is considered a formal behavior and calling out a relaxed behavior, they find that boys are more likely to call out without raising their hands and demand attention:

Sometimes what they [boys] say has little or nothing to do with the teacher's questions. Whether male comments are insightful or irrelevant, teachers respond to them. However, when girls call out, there is a fascinating occurrence: Suddenly the teacher remembers the rule about raising your hand before you talk. (Sadker and Sadker 1994: 43)

This gendered dynamic of hand-raising exists even in preschool, although our field notes do not provide enough systematic recording of hand-raising to fully assess it. However, such a dynamic applies to many bodily movements and comportment:

The kids are sitting with their legs folded in a circle listening to Jane (the teacher) talk about dinosaurs. ("Circle" is the most formal part of their preschool education each day and is like sitting in class.) Sam has the ballet slippers on his hands and is clapping them together really loudly. He stops and does a half-somersault backward out of the circle and stays that way with his legs in the air. Jane says nothing and continues talking about dinosaurs. Sue, who is sitting next to Sam, pushes his leg out of her way. Sam sits up and is now busy trying to put the ballet shoes on over his sneakers, and he is looking at the other kids and laughing, trying to get a reaction. He is clearly not paying

attention to Jane's dinosaur story and is distracting the other kids. Sam takes the shoes and claps them together again. Jane leans over and tells him to give her the shoes. Sam does, and then lies down all stretched out on the floor, arms over his head, legs apart. Adam is also lying down now, and Keith is on Sara's (the teacher's aide) lap. Rachel takes her sweater off and folds it up. The other children are focused on the teacher. After about five minutes, Jane tells Sam, "I'm going to ask you to sit up." (She doesn't say anything to Adam.) But he doesn't move. Jane ignores Sam and Adam and continues with the lesson. Rachel now lies down on her back. After about ten seconds Jane says, "Sit up, Rachel." Rachel sits up and listens to what kind of painting the class will do today. (Five-year-olds)

Sam's behavior had to be more disruptive, extensive, and informal than Rachel's for the teacher to instruct him and his bodily movements to be quieter and for him to comport his body properly for circle. Note that the boys who were relaxed but not disruptive were not instructed to sit properly. It was also common for a teacher to tell a boy to stop some bodily behavior and for the boy to ignore the request and the teacher not to enforce her instructions, although she frequently repeated them.

The gendering of body movements, comportment, and acquisitions of space also happens in more subtle ways. For example, often when there was "free" time, boys spent much more time in child-structured activities than did girls. In one classroom of five-year-olds, boys' "free" time was usually spent building with blocks, climbing on blocks, or crawling on the blocks or on the floor as they worked to build with the blocks whereas girls



spent much of their free time sitting at tables cutting things out of paper, drawing, sorting small pieces of blocks into categories, reading stories, and so on. Compared to boys, girls rarely crawled on the floor (except when they played kitty cats). Girls and boys did share some activities. For example, painting and reading were frequently shared, and the three-year-olds often played at fishing from a play bridge together. Following is a list from my field notes of the most common activities boys and girls did during the child-structured activity periods of the day during two randomly picked weeks of observing:

*Boys:* played blocks (floor), played at the water table (standing and splashing), played superhero (running around and in play house), played with the car garage (floor), painted at the easel (standing).

*Girls:* played dolls (sitting in chairs and walking around), played dress-up (standing), coloring (sitting at tables), read stories (sitting on the couch), cut out pictures (sitting at tables).

Children sorted themselves into these activities and also were sorted (or not unsorted) by teachers. For example, teachers rarely told the three boys who always played with the blocks that they had to choose a different activity that day. Teachers also encouraged girls to sit at tables by suggesting table activities for them—in a sense giving them less “free” time or structuring their time more.

It’s the end of circle, and Susan (teacher) tells the kids that today they can paint their dinosaur eggs if they want to. There is a table set up with paints and brushes for those who want to do that. The kids listen and then scatter to their usual activities. Several boys are playing blocks, two boys are at the water table. Several girls are looking at the hamsters in their cage and talking about them, two girls are sitting and stringing plastic beads. Susan says across the classroom, “I need some painters, Joy, Amy, Kendall?” The girls leave the hamster cage and go to the painting table. Susan pulls out a chair so Joy can sit down. She tells them about the painting project. (Five-year-olds)

These girls spent much of the afternoon enjoying themselves painting their eggs. Simon and Jack joined them temporarily, but then went back to activities that were not teacher-structured.

Events like these that happen on a regular basis over an extended period of early childhood serve to gender children’s bodies—boys come to take up more room with their bodies, to sit in more open positions, and to feel freer to do what they wish with their bodies, even in relatively formal settings. Henley (1977) finds that among adults men generally are more relaxed than women in their demeanor and women tend to have tenser postures. The looseness of body-focused functions (e.g., belching) is also more open to men than to women. In other words, men are more likely to engage in relaxed demeanors, postures, and behaviors. These data suggest that this gendering of bodies into more formal and more relaxed movements, postures, and comportment is (at least partially) constructed in early childhood by institutions like preschools.

### Controlling Voice

Speaking (or yelling as is often the case with kids) is a bodily experience that involves mouth, throat, chest, diaphragm, and facial expression. Thorne (1993) writes that an elementary school teacher once told her that kids “reminded her of bumblebees, an apt image of swarms, speed, and constant motion” (p. 15). Missing from this metaphor is the buzz of the bumblebees, as a constant hum of voices comes from children’s play and activities. Kids’ play that is giggly, loud, or whispery makes it clear that voice is part of their bodily experiences.

Voice is an aspect of bodily experience that teachers and schools are interested in disciplining. Quiet appears to be required for learning in classrooms. Teaching appropriate levels of voice, noise, and sound disciplines children’s bodies and prepares them “from the inside” to learn the school’s curriculums and to participate in other social institutions.



**Table 3 Observations of Teachers Telling Children to Be Quiet, by Gender of Child: Five Preschool Classrooms**

Gender	N	Percent
Girls	45	73
Boys	16	26
Total	61	100

Note: Coded from references in the field notes to instances of teachers quieting children's voices.

The disciplining of children's voices is gendered. I found that girls were told to be quiet or to repeat a request in a quieter, "nicer" voice about three times more often than were boys (see Table 3). This finding is particularly interesting because boys' play was frequently much noisier. However, when boys were noisy, they were also often doing other behaviors the teacher did not allow, and perhaps the teachers focused less on voice because they were more concerned with stopping behaviors like throwing or running.

Additionally, when boys were told to "quiet down" they were told in large groups, rarely as individuals. When they were being loud and were told to be quiet, boys were often in the process of enacting what Jordan and Cowan (1995) call warrior narratives:

A group of three boys is playing with wooden doll figures. The dolls are jumping off block towers, crashing into each other. Kevin declares loudly, "I'm the grown up." Keith replies, "I'm the police." They knock the figures into each other and push each other away. Phil grabs a figure from Keith. Keith picks up two more and bats one with the other toward Phil. Now all three boys are crashing the figures into each other, making them dive off towers. They're having high fun. Two more boys join the group. There are now five boys playing with the wooden dolls and the blocks. They're breaking block buildings; things are crashing; they're grabbing each other's figures and yelling loudly. Some are yelling "fire, fire" as their figures jump off the block tower. The room is very noisy. (Five-year-olds)

Girls as individuals and in groups were frequently told to lower their voices. Later that same afternoon:

During snack time the teacher asks the kids to tell her what they like best in the snack mix. Hillary says, "Marshmallows!" loudly, vigorously, and with a swing of her arm. The teacher turns to her and says, "I'm going to ask you to say that quietly," and Hillary repeats it in a softer voice. (Five-year-olds)

These two observations represent a prominent pattern in the data. The boys playing with the wooden figures were allowed to express their fun and enthusiasm loudly whereas Hillary could not loudly express her love of marshmallows. Girls' voices are disciplined to be softer and in many ways less physical—toning down their voices tones down their physicality. Hillary emphasized "marshmallows" with a large swinging gesture of her arm the first time she answered the teacher's question, but after the teacher asked her to say it quietly she made no gestures when answering. Incidents like these that are repeated often in different contexts restrict girls' physicality.

It could be argued that context rather than gender explains the difference in how much noise is allowed in these situations. Teachers may expect more formal behavior from children sitting at the snack table than they do during semistructured activities. However, even during free play girls were frequently told to quiet down:

Nancy, Susan, and Amy are jumping in little jumps, from the balls of their feet, almost like skipping rope without the rope. Their mouths are open and they're making a humming sound, looking at each other and giggling. Two of them keep sticking their tongues out. They seem to be having great fun. The teacher's aide sitting on the floor in front of them turns around and says "Shhh, find something else to play. Why don't you play Simon Says?" All three girls stop initially. Then Amy jumps a few more times, but without making the noise. (Five-year-olds)



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By limiting the girls' voices, the teacher also limits the girls' jumping and their fun. The girls learn that their bodies are supposed to be quiet, small, and physically constrained. Although the girls did not take the teacher's suggestion to play Simon Says (a game where bodies can be moved only quietly at the order of another), they turn to play that explores quietness yet tries to maintain some of the fun they were having:

Nancy, Susan, and Amy begin sorting a pile of little-bitty pieces of puzzles, soft blocks, Legos, and so on into categories to "help" the teacher who told them to be quiet and to clean up. The three of them and the teacher are standing around a single small desk sorting these pieces. (Meanwhile several boys are playing blocks and their play is spread all over the middle of the room.) The teacher turns her attention to some other children. The girls continue sorting and then begin giggling to each other. As they do, they cover their mouths. This becomes a game as one imitates the other. Susan says something nonsensical that is supposed to be funny, and then she "hee-hees" while covering her mouth and looks at Nancy, to whom she has said it, who covers her mouth and "hee-hees" back. They begin putting their hands/fingers cupped over their mouths and whispering in each others' ears and then giggling quietly. They are intermittently sorting the pieces and playing the whispering game. (Five-year-olds)

Thus, the girls took the instruction to be quiet and turned it into a game. This new game made their behaviors smaller, using hands and mouths rather than legs, feet, and whole bodies. Whispering became their fun, instead of jumping and humming. Besides requiring quiet, this whispering game also was gendered in another way: The girls' behavior seemed to mimic stereotypical female gossiping. They whispered in twos and looked at the third girl as they did it and then changed roles. Perhaps the instruction to be quiet, combined with the female role of "helping," led the girls to one of their understandings of female quietness—gossip—a type of feminine quietness that is perhaps most fun.

Finally, by limiting voice teachers limit one of girls' mechanisms for resisting others' mistreatment of them. Frequently, when a girl had a dispute with another child, teachers would ask the girl to quiet down and solve the problem nicely. Teachers also asked boys to solve problems by talking, but they usually did so only with intense disputes and the instruction to talk things out never carried the instruction to talk *quietly*.

Keith is persistently threatening to knock over the building that Amy built. He is running around her with a "flying" toy horse that comes dangerously close to her building each time. She finally says, "Stop it!" in a loud voice. The teacher comes over and asks, "How do we say that, Amy?" Amy looks at Keith and says more softly, "Stop trying to knock it over." The teacher tells Keith to find some place else to play. (Five-year-olds)

Cheryl and Julie are playing at the sand table. Cheryl says to the teacher loudly, "Julie took mine away!" The teacher tells her to say it more quietly. Cheryl repeats it less loudly. The teacher tells her, "Say it a little quieter." Cheryl says it quieter, and the teacher says to Julie, "Please don't take that away from her." (Three-year-olds)

We know that women are reluctant to use their voices to protect themselves from a variety of dangers. The above observations suggest that the denial of women's voices begins at least as early as preschool, and that restricting voice usually restricts movement as well.

Finally, there were occasions when the quietness requirement did not restrict girls' bodies. One class of three-year-olds included two Asian girls, Diane and Sue, who did not speak English. Teachers tended to talk about them and over them but rarely to them. Although these girls said little to other children and were generally quiet, they were what I term body instigators. They got attention and played with other children in more bodily ways than most girls. For example, Sue developed a game with another girl that was a sort of musical chairs.



They'd race from one chair to another to see who could sit down first. Sue initiated this game by trying to squeeze into a chair with the other girl. Also, for example,

Diane starts peeking into the play cardboard house that is full of boys and one girl. She looks like she wants to go in, but the door is blocked and *...the house is crowded. She then goes around to the side of the house and stands with her back to it and starts bumping it with her butt. Because the house is cardboard, it buckles and moves as she does it. The teacher tells her, "Stop—no." Diane stops and then starts doing it again but more lightly. All the boys come out of the house and ask her what she's doing. Matt gets right in her face and the teacher tells him, "Tell her no." He does, but all the other boys have moved on to other activities, so she and Matt go in the house together. (Three-year-olds)*

Thus, Diane and Sue's lack of voice in this English-speaking classroom led to greater physicality. There may be other ways that context (e.g., in one's neighborhood instead of school) and race, ethnicity, and class shape gender and voice that cannot be determined from these data (Goodwin 1990).

### Bodily Instructions

Teachers give a lot of instructions to kids about what to do with their bodies. Of the explicit bodily

instructions recorded 65 percent were directed to boys, 26 percent to girls, and the remaining 9 percent were directed to mixed groups (Table 4). These numbers suggest that boys' bodies are being disciplined more than girls. However, there is more to this story—the types of instructions that teachers give and children's responses to them are also gendered.

First, boys obeyed teachers' bodily instructions about one-half of the time (48 percent), while girls obeyed about 80 percent of the time (Table 4).<sup>4</sup> Boys may receive more instructions from teachers because they are less likely to follow instructions and thus are told repeatedly. Frequently I witnessed a teacher telling a boy or group of boys to stop doing something—usually running or throwing things—and the teacher repeated these instructions several times in the course of the session before (if ever) taking further action. Teachers usually did not have to repeat instructions to girls—girls either stopped on their own with the first instruction, or because the teacher forced them to stop right then. Serbin (1983) finds that boys receive a higher proportion of teachers' ". . . loud reprimands, audible to the entire group. Such patterns of response, intended as punishment, have been repeatedly demonstrated to reinforce aggression and other forms of disruptive behavior" (p. 29).

Second, teachers' instructions directed to boys' bodies were less substantive than those directed

**Table 4 Observations of Teachers Giving Bodily Instructions to Children, by Gender of Child: Five Preschool Classrooms**

Teacher's instruction/child's response	Boys		Girls		Mixed Groups	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Bodily instructions from teachers <sup>a</sup>	94	65	39	26	13	9
Child obeys instructions <sup>b</sup>	45	48	31	80	— <sup>c</sup>	— <sup>c</sup>
Undirected bodily instructions from teachers <sup>b</sup>	54	57	6	15	5	55

Note: Bodily instructions are coded from references in the field notes to instances of a teacher telling a child what to do with his or her body.

<sup>a</sup> Percentages based on a total of 146 observations.

<sup>b</sup> Percentages based on a total of 94 observations for boys and 39 observations for girls.

<sup>c</sup> In the observations of mixed groups of girls and boys, usually some obeyed and some did not. Thus an accurate count of how the groups responded is not available.



to girls. That is, teachers' instructions to boys were usually to stop doing something, to end a bodily behavior with little suggestion for other behaviors they might do. Teachers rarely told boys to change a bodily behavior. A list of teachers' instructions to boys includes: stop throwing, stop jumping, stop clapping, stop splashing, no pushing, don't cry, blocks are not for bopping, don't run, don't climb on that. Fifty-seven percent of the instructions that teachers gave boys about their physical behaviors were of this undirected type, compared with 15 percent of their instructions to girls (Table 4). In other words, teachers' instructions to girls generally were more substantive and more directive, telling girls to do a bodily behavior rather than to stop one. Teachers' instructions to girls suggested that they alter their behaviors. A list of instructions to girls includes: talk to her, don't yell, sit here, pick that up, be careful, be gentle, give it to me, put it down there. Girls may have received fewer bodily instructions than did boys, but they received more directive ones. This gender difference leaves boys a larger range of possibilities of what they might choose to do with their bodies once they have stopped a behavior, whereas girls were directed toward a defined set of options. . . .

#### Physical Interaction Among Children

Thorne (1993) demonstrates that children participate in the construction of gender differences among themselves. The preschool brings together large groups of children who engage in interactions in which they cooperate with the hidden curriculum and discipline each other's bodies in gendered ways, but they also engage in interactions in which they resist this curriculum.

Girls and boys teach their same-sex peers about their bodies and physicality. Children in these observations were much more likely to imitate the physical behavior of a same-sex peer than a cross-sex peer. Children also encourage others to imitate them. Some gendered physicality develops in this way. For example, I observed one boy encouraging other boys to "take up more space" in the same way he was.

James (one of the most active boys in the class) is walking all over the blocks that Joe, George, and Paul have built into a road. Then he starts spinning around with his arms stretched out on either side of him. He has a plastic toy cow in one hand and is yelling, "Moo." He spins through half of the classroom, other children ducking under his arms or walking around him when he comes near them. Suddenly he drops the cow and still spinning, starts shouting, "I'm a tomato! I'm a tomato!" The three boys who were playing blocks look at him and laugh. James says, "I'm a tomato!" again, and Joe says, "There's the tomato." Joe, George, and Paul continue working on their block road. James then picks up a block and lobs it in their direction and then keeps spinning throughout this half of the classroom saying he's a tomato. Joe and George look up when the block lands near them and then they get up and imitate James. Now three boys are spinning throughout much of the room, shouting that they are tomatoes. The other children in the class are trying to go about their play without getting hit by a tomato. (Five-year-olds)

The within-gender physicality of three-year-old girls and boys was more similar than it was among the five-year-olds. Among the three-year-old girls there was more rough-and-tumble play, more physical fighting and arguing among girls than there was among the five-year-old girls.

During clean-up, Emily and Sara argue over putting away some rope. They both pull on the ends of the rope until the teacher comes over and separates them. Emily walks around the classroom then, not cleaning anything up. She sings to herself, does a twirl, and gets in line for snack. Sara is behind her in line. Emily pushes Sara. Sara yells, "Aaahh," and hits Emily and pushes her. The teacher takes both of them out of line and talks to them about getting along and being nice to each other. (Three-year-olds)

From lessons like [this], this girls have learned by age five that their play with each other should not be "too rough." The physical engagement of girls



with each other at age five had little rough-and-tumble play:

Three girls leave the dress-up corner. Mary crawls on the floor as Naomi and Jennifer talk. Jennifer touches Naomi's shoulder gently as she talks to her. They are having quite a long conversation. Jennifer is explaining something to Naomi. Jennifer's gestures are adult-like except that she fiddles with Naomi's vest buttons as she talks to her. Her touching and fiddling with Naomi's clothes is very gentle, how a child might fiddle with a mom's clothing while talking to her—doing it absent-mindedly. Mary, on the floor, is pretending to be a kitty. Then Jennifer gets on the floor and is a kitty too. They are squeaking, trying to mimic a cat's meow. Naomi then puts her arm around Susan's shoulder and leads her to play kitty too. Naomi seems to be a person still, not a kitty. She is in charge of the kitties. (Five-year-olds)

Two girls are playing with the dishes and sitting at a table. Keisha touches Alice under the chin, tickles her almost, then makes her eat something pretend, then touches the corners of her mouth, telling her to smile. (Five-year-olds)

I do not mean to suggest that girls' physical engagement with each other is the opposite of boys' or that all of boys' physical contacts were rough

and tumble. Boys, especially in pairs, hugged, gently guided, or helped each other climb or jump. But often, especially in groups of three or more and especially among the five-year-olds, boys' physical engagement was highly active, "rough," and frequent. Boys experienced these contacts as great fun and not as hostile or negative in any way:

Keith and Lee are jumping on the couch, diving onto it like high jumpers, colliding with each other as they do. Alan watches them and then climbs onto the back of the couch and jumps off. Keith takes a jump onto the couch, lands on Lee, and then yells, "Ouch, ouch—I hurt my private," and he runs out of the room holding onto his crotch. The teacher tells them to stop jumping on the couch. (Five-year-olds)

The physical engagement of boys and girls *with each other* differed from same-sex physical engagement. Because girls' and boys' play is semi-segregated, collisions (literal and figurative) in play happen at the borders of these gender-segregated groups (Maccoby 1988; Thorne 1993). As Thorne (1993) demonstrates, not all borderwork is negative—40 percent of the physical interactions observed between girls and boys were positive or neutral (Table 5).

Ned runs over to Veronica, hipchecks her and says "can I be your friend?" and she says "yes." Ned

**Table 5 Observations of Physical Interactions among Children, by Gender of Children: Five Preschool Classrooms**

Type of Interaction	Interactions between:					
	Boys		Girls		Boys and Girls	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Positive	46	70	42	66	20	18
Negative	19	29	20	31	68	60
Neutral	1	2	2	3	26	23
Total	66	101	64	100	114	101

Note: Physical interaction was coded from references in the field notes to bodily interaction between children. Bodily contact that was minor and seemingly meaningless was not recorded in field notes. For example, children brushing against each other while picking up toys was not recorded if both children ignored the contact and did not alter their actions because of it. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.



walks away and kicks the blocks again three to four times. (Five-year-olds)

However, cross-gender interactions were more likely to be negative than same-sex interactions. In fact, physical interactions among children were twice as likely to be a negative interactions if they were between a girl and boy than if they were among same-gender peers. Approximately 30 percent of the interactions among girls and among boys were negative (hostile, angry, controlling, hurtful), whereas 60 percent of mixed-gender physical interactions were negative. Sixty percent of 113 boy-girl physical interactions were initiated by boys, 39 percent were initiated by girls, and only 1 percent of these interactions were mutually initiated.

At the borders of semi-segregated play there are physical interactions about turf and toy ownership:

Sylvia throws play money on the floor from her play pocketbook. Jon grabs it up. She wrestles him for it and pries it from his hands. In doing this she forces him onto the floor so that he's hunched forward on his knees. She gets behind him and sandwiches him on the floor as she grabs his hands and gets the money loose. Then, two minutes later, she's giving money to kids, and she gives Jon some, but apparently not enough. He gets right close to her face, inches away and loudly tells her that he wants more. He scrunches up his face, puts his arms straight down by his sides and makes fists. She steps back; he steps up close again to her face. She turns away. (Five-year-olds)

Negative interactions occur when there are "invasions" or interruptions of play among children of one gender by children of another:

Courtney is sitting on the floor with the girls who are playing "kitties." The girls have on their dress-up clothes and dress-up shoes. Phil puts on big winter gloves and then jumps in the middle of the girls on the floor. He lands on their shoes. Courtney pushes him away and then pulls her legs and clothes and stuff closer to her. She takes up

less space and is sitting in a tight ball on the floor. Phil yells, "No! Aaarrhh." Julie says, "It's not nice to yell." (Five-year-olds)

As Thorne (1993) suggests, kids create, shape, and police the borders of gender. I suggest that they do so physically. In this way, they not only sustain gender segregation, but also maintain a sense that girls and boys are physically different, that their bodies are capable of doing certain kinds of things. This sense of physical differences may make all gender differences feel and appear natural.

### Conclusion

Children also sometimes resist their bodies being gendered. For example, three-year-old boys dressed up in women's clothes sometimes. Five-year-old girls played with a relaxed comportment that is normatively (hegemonically) masculine when they sat with their feet up on the desk and their chairs tipped backward. In one classroom when boys were at the height of their loud activity—running and throwing toys and blocks—girls took the opportunity to be loud too as the teachers were paying less attention to them and trying to get the boys to settle down. In individual interactions as well, girls were likely to be loud and physically assertive if a boy was being unusually so:

José is making a plastic toy horse fly around the room, and the boys playing with the blocks are quite loud and rambunctious. José flies the toy horse right in front of Jessica's face and then zooms around her and straight toward her again. Jessica holds up her hand and waves it at him yelling, "Aaaarrhh." José flies the horse in another direction. (Five-year-olds)

These instances of resistance suggest that gendered physicalities are not natural, nor are they easily and straightforwardly acquired. This research demonstrates the many ways that practices in institutions like preschools facilitate children's acquisition of gendered physicalities.

Men and women and girls and boys fill social space with their bodies in different ways.



Our everyday movements, postures, and gestures are gendered. These bodily differences enhance the seeming naturalness of sexual and reproductive differences, that then construct inequality between men and women (Butler 1990). As MacKinnon (1987) notes, "Differences are inequality's post hoc excuse. . . ." (p. 8). In other words, these differences create a context for social relations in which differences confirm inequalities of power.

This research suggests one way that bodies are gendered and physical differences are constructed through social institutions and their practices. Because this gendering occurs at an early age, the seeming naturalness of such differences is further underscored. In preschool, bodies become gendered in ways that are so subtle and taken-for-granted that they come to feel and appear natural. Preschool, however, is presumably just the tip of the iceberg in the gendering of children's bodies. Families, formal schooling, and other institutions (like churches, hospitals, and workplaces) gender children's physicality as well.

Many feminist sociologists (West and Zimmerman 1987) and other feminist scholars (Butler 1990, 1993) have examined how the seeming naturalness of gender differences underlies gender inequality. They have also theorized that there are no meaningful natural differences (Butler 1990, 1993). However, how gender differences come to feel and appear natural in the first place has been a missing piece of the puzzle.

Sociological theories of the body that describe the regulation, disciplining, and managing that social institutions do to bodies have neglected the gendered nature of these processes (Foucault 1979; Shilling 1993; Turner 1984). These data suggest that a significant part of disciplining the body consists of gendering it, even in subtle, micro, everyday ways that make gender appear natural. It is in this sense that the preschool as an institution genders children's bodies. Feminist theories about the body (Bordo 1993; Connell 1995; Young 1990), on the other hand, tend to focus on the adult

gendered body and fail to consider how the body becomes gendered. This neglect may accentuate gender differences and make them seem natural. This research provides but one account of how bodies become gendered. Other accounts of how the bodies of children and adults are gendered (and raced, classed, and sexualized) are needed in various social contexts across the life course.

### Notes

1. Classrooms usually contained 15 to 18 children on a given day. However, since some kids came to preschool five days a week, some three, and some two, a total of 112 different kids were observed.
2. Parents are not solely responsible for what their children wear to preschool, as they are constrained by what is available and affordable in children's clothing. More important, children, especially at ages three to five, want some say in what they wear to preschool and may insist on some outfits and object to others.
3. Throughout the paper, when I use the term "constructed," I do *not* mean that preschools create these differences or that they are the only origins of these differences. Clearly, children come to preschool with some gender differences that were created in the family or other contexts outside of preschool. My argument is that preschools reinforce these differences and build (construct) further elaborations of difference upon what children bring to preschool.
4. There were several cases for boys and girls in which the observer did not record the child's response.

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### Reflective Questions

1. Martin argues that socialization in preschool doesn't just lead boys and girls to develop different tastes or styles but rather inscribes gender into kids' bodies and bodily experiences. How did teachers' instructions and discipline impart gendered control of the body? When did kids resist these gendered lessons? How did they reinforce and extend them?
2. What are the long-term implications of these lessons for boys' and girls' identities and performance in schools? If gendered bodily appearances and actions are not natural and take considerable work, how do they end up feeling natural?
3. Take a few minutes to try to unlearn your own gender socialization by learning to walk like another gender. Enlist a friend to teach you. If you





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identify as a woman, have a man teach you to walk like a man, including body movements, comportment, and mannerisms. Try to learn to turn around and do a casual greeting of an acquaintance, too. Men, enlist a woman to teach you to walk like a woman. If you identify as transgender, you likely have experience with gender neutrality and/or gender play. Enlist a friend, and teach him/her how to walk in gender-neutral ways. How easy and comfortable was the exercise? What body movements did you struggle with the most? Were you socialized into gendered bodies like Martin's kids? What happens when people interact with someone whose sex category is not identifiable or is gender neutral?

4. After the *Toronto Star* printed a story about a Canadian family who refused to disclose their

baby Storm's sex, opting instead to raise the child gender neutrally, American news outlets quickly picked up the story. (Read the original at: [www.parentcentral.ca/parent/babiespregnancy/babies/article/995112](http://www.parentcentral.ca/parent/babiespregnancy/babies/article/995112).) ABC News's headline read: "Canadian Mother Raising 'Genderless' Baby, Storm, Defends Her Family's Decision," while CNN World ran the story under the headline: "Storm: Boy or a Girl? It's a Secret—And an International Controversy." Lisa Belkin of the New York Times's Motherlode blog covered it under the heading "Is This Baby a Boy or Girl?" What challenges does this couple face in raising a gender-neutral child? How do others ensure categorization, even if we reject the category for ourselves? What other categories shape how people think about and use their bodies?





## Women and Their Clitoris

DENNIS D. WASKUL, PHILLIP VANNINI, AND DESIREE WIESEN

*In an earlier selection, Kent Sandstrom highlighted how and why the names we give to things shape our perceptions and interpretations of them, thereby guiding our actions toward them. Sandstrom thus articulated a core premise of symbolic interactionism, the social psychological perspective that emphasizes how we depend on symbols and social meanings to make sense of the realities we encounter, including the realities of our bodies and bodily sensations. But what happens when we do not have a name for a reality or experience we encounter? For instance, how do we make sense of and respond to bodily parts or sensations that have no name or that are widely regarded as unspeakable? And how do the silences and social meanings that surround these bodily parts or sensations shape our understandings and experiences of them?*

*This selection addresses these questions by examining how women make sense of the clitoris and its associated sensations in the face of the linguistic silences that surround it. Indeed, the authors demonstrate how many women do not even learn that they have a clitoris until their late adolescence, despite having taken sexual education classes in school. The authors also explore how women "discover" the clitoris, how they transform it into a significant symbol, and how larger cultural discourses impede these processes of discovery and signification, particularly by erasing the clitoris,*

*or at least keeping it linguistically hidden from view. Perhaps most crucially, the authors reveal how this discursive environment promotes both symbolic clitoridectomy and symbolic purgatory, conditions that render the clitoris as mute, as unspeakable, and/or as a province that others may control or occupy, even if this diminishes women's sexual pleasure.*

*In the end, the provocative research discussed in this selection challenges and extends the insights of symbolic interactionism and sociological psychology. The authors portray how somatic experiences can be reflexive and meaningful even when symbolic resources are relatively scarce or absent. They also show some of the key phases that characterize a somatic career, at least in regard to some women's discoveries and experiences of their clitorises. Moreover, the authors highlight how women are active agents, not passive victims, in formulating their responses to the conditions of symbolic clitoridectomy and symbolic purgatory that they confront. That is, women do not simply internalize and reproduce cultural discourses that pertain to their sexual organs and sensations. Instead, they actively make meaning of their bodies, clitorises, and sensual experiences, negotiating the complex dialogues that take place between their bodily sensations and the shifting discourses and interactions that surround them.*

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### Symbolic Clitoridectomy and Symbolic Purgatory

Except for the obvious, derisive “clit,” I find no common slang words—no common words at all—for the clitoris, the great unmentionable, the only human organ with the single purpose of pleasure. This is an oversight almost impossible to believe, and it makes me wonder at the depth of our capacity to suppress our experience—to suppress it so deeply, even the making of language is stopped.

Sally Tisdale, *Talk Dirty to Me: An Intimate Philosophy of Sex* (1994)

I don't remember ever being told that a clitoris is a normal part of a female's body.

Rebecca

Women's genitalia are generally unspeakable (Allan and Burrridge 1991) and a site of considerable taboo (Braun 1999). In fact, “many people appear to consider women's genitalia to be unmentionable” (Braun and Kitzinger 2001a: 146), and “language is rarely used to refer to the vagina (or women's genitalia more generally) in any detail” (Braun and Wilkinson 2001: 19). The vulva is imprecisely defined, and its parts are often conspicuously absent in formal medical and dictionary definitions as well as in informal slang (Braun and Kitzinger 2001a). In place of terms that differentiate the various anatomical parts of the vulva, the word *vagina* is colloquially and popularly used to refer to the entire area “down there.” Accordingly, “a language that does not enable women to talk about the different parts of the genitalia, or to conceptualize the genitalia as comprised of various parts, might perpetuate the absence of women's genitalia from their conceptualized body” (Braun and Kitzinger 2001a: 155).

Vulva taboos are reflected and reinforced in a relative scarcity of language, and the clitoris may be the most muted of all. In Western culture the clitoris remains a part of women's bodies that eschews naming and mention (Bennett 1993; Ogletree and Ginsburg 2000). Throughout history the clitoris

has irregularly cycled through hiding, discovery, degradation, reinvention, and destruction (Moore and Clarke 1995; Scheper-Hughes 1991). Even the history of the scientific study of anatomy shows wide-ranging variations in the technical construction of the clitoris, which have often classified the clitoris as homologous or analogous to the penis (Moore and Clarke 1995). The result is a symbolic clitoridectomy in which “it” is “kept under the hood” (Ogletree and Ginsburg 2000: 917, 925) in a subdued state of symbolic purgatory—one of the many outcomes of discursive practices that have historically contributed to the hysterization of women's bodies (Foucault 1979). The conditions and consequences of symbolic clitoridectomy have provoked substantial critique: the hush reflects and perpetuates “the blank balance sheet of our society's concern for women's pleasure” (McClintock 1992: 115); contributes to both silencing and control of women's sexuality (see Cornog 1986; Gartrell and Mosbacher 1984; Lerner 1976); reinforces vaginal rather than clitoral constructions of feminine sexual pleasure (see Bennett 1993); and contributes to a partial absence of genitalia from women's conceptualized bodies (see Braun and Kitzinger 2001a, 2001b; Braun and Wilkinson 2001; Moore and Clarke 1995; Ogletree and Ginsburg 2000).

It might seem that symbolic clitoridectomy is an obvious case of repression, a “repression that operate[s] as a sentence to disappear” (Foucault 1984: 293). However, symbolic clitoridectomy is consistent with Foucauldian arguments on bio-power and technologies of the body (see Foucault 1979, 1980). Symbolic clitoridectomy operates as a specific political anatomy strategy, a technology of the body that incites awareness, self-knowledge, and speaking the truth by way of erasing the clitoris; a mechanism by which “it” and its experiences are placed in a purgatory—where ignorance and partial knowledge ironically coexist—and abundant discourses “make possible [its] discovery” (Foucault 1979: 43). There is a *relative* scarcity, but not absolute lack, of discursive resources to negotiate the meanings of women's bodies and



sexualities. In fact, a Janus-faced condition exists: a dearth of symbolic meaning in the context of multiple discourses for potential discovery.' Thus, we characterize symbolic clitoridectomy as putting the clitoris "under erasure," allowing it to be implicitly present in discourse under conditions of its explicit absence—as we illustrate below.

### Method and Data

This study was conducted at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Because data collection procedures required women to reveal personal and potentially embarrassing information, we relied on a purposive sample and an elaborate procedure to assure anonymity. Women qualified for this study if they were enrolled in or successfully completed a sexualities course taught by Dennis Waskul. We felt this population of women would be more likely to participate because of their exposure to a multiplicity of discourses on sexuality. We acknowledge the limitations of this sampling procedure—the sample is not representative, and the data likely reflect volunteer bias; we suspect that women with some of the most evocative and perhaps troubling experiences were the least likely to volunteer for this study.

By e-mail we initially contacted sixty-four women and individually invited them to participate in a research project on women's private and personal sexual experiences of their bodies. We further asked each woman to reply by e-mail if interested in participating. Forty-one women responded. Respondents subsequently received another e-mail that disclosed the research procedures, methods to guarantee relative anonymity, and all research questions. We informed women that, should they choose to participate in this study, we would provide them with a notebook and a list of questions that they would answer privately and with complete anonymity (on this and similar methods see Plummer 2001). Questions elicited basic demographic data as well as the women's earliest recollections of discovering their clitoris, earliest recollection of having been told or otherwise learned about the clitoris as

a normal part of female anatomy, history with masturbation, and so on.

Women willing to participate in this study were responsible for sending an e-mail to Desiree Wiesen, who would arrange a time and place to have them sign a research consent form and would provide them with the research materials. We informed the respondents that Wiesen would collect and seal all research consent forms (in the unlikely event that they would ever be needed); she also collected and securely sealed all notebooks, which were immediately provided to Waskul. We further informed women that neither Waskul nor Phillip Vannini would have access to the research consent forms and Wiesen would not have access to the contents of their notebooks. These procedures—the strategic use of e-mail and our division of methodological and analytic labor—were designed to assure double-blind anonymity; we do not know who agreed to participate in this study and only by unsealing the research consent forms (in the possession of Wiesen) is it possible to identify those participants or match any one woman with the data she provided.

Twenty women signed consent forms and received research materials, and fifteen women returned completed notebooks. While we initially hoped for a larger sample, we also understood women's hesitation in revealing such personal information. However, in the end, a sample of fifteen proved satisfactory. The research procedures provided a private and anonymous discursive space in which women wrote exceedingly rich accounts. Women answered thirteen questions and collectively provided a total of 204 handwritten pages of text.

Our sample is overwhelmingly Caucasian; only one woman identified herself as nonwhite. The sample is equally homogeneous in other categories. Ages narrowly ranged from nineteen to twenty-two. Nine women described their upbringing as "rural"; five as a mix of "rural" and "urban" environments; one woman described her upbringing as "urban." Ten women identified themselves as either "heterosexual" or "straight"; one woman identified



herself as “mostly heterosexual”; one described her sexual orientation as “straight, although I’ve kissed girls when I’ve/we’ve been drinking a lot”; one woman wrote “my orientation changes depending on the situation I’m in”; one woman identified herself as “bisexual”; and one woman did not identify a sexual orientation. Five women described themselves as “single”; four claimed to be “engaged”; one woman wrote that she is “soon to be engaged I hope”; the remaining five women described themselves as in “long term,” “serious,” or “cohabitating” relationships with men. One woman in this study described herself as a “virgin.” We refer to all women in this study by pseudonyms. . . .

#### Clitoral Erasure and a Socialization of Genital Ignorance

Here I am a twenty-year-old woman and I still do not know much about my genitals.

Rebecca

Derived from the Greek *kleitoris*, meaning “hill” or “slope,” even etymology cloaks the delectable clitoris. No mere “hill” or “slope”—semantically significant only for its shape or form—the clitoris is the most sensitive female sex organ; pleasure is its only known function. Certainly, “female sexuality, like female pleasure, is multiply sited. It presents, therefore, multiple ways in which it can be constructed—as well as experienced—by individual women” (Bennett 1993: 238). Nonetheless, as all the women in this study testify, the clitoris is a corporeal epicenter of embodied female sexuality:

Without my clitoris, I believe I’d still be an orgasm virgin. . . . clit stimulation is the only way I can be sexually orgasmic. . . . The clitoris is *the* most important part of sexual satisfaction and gratification, whether I’m solo or partnered up. (Cindy; emphasis in original)

All the other stuff is fun, but doesn’t really matter unless my clit gets attention. . . . I get some pleasure from the other things but it always goes back to my clit 100%. (Danielle)

The women in this study bestowed enormous significance on and fondness for their clitoris. As Jessica claimed, “Seriously, the clitoris was God’s gift to women! (I almost pity men for all the opportunities unavailable to them).” Both Rochelle and Diana audaciously announced, “I love my clitoris!” These sentiments are understandable, but beg a question: in light of its affectionate, pleasurable, and orgasmic significance, *how* do women learn about the clitoris?

Women reported various circumstances in which they discovered and learned about their clitoris. However, one striking commonality is the frequent claim that they did not acquire this information in primary and secondary educational settings. As Jill recalled, “I don’t remember ever being told about the clitoris. . . . [W]e never covered genitalia in the health classes at school. I don’t remember covering human anatomy at all.” Similarly, Rochelle claimed:

[The] “Family Life” program in school (fifth grade) showed me the pictures, but did not *detail* the parts. Probably my freshman year of high school is actually when we heard the parts explained in health class. (emphasis in original)

Several women equally testified to this curricular omission that, as they recalled, was especially impoverished regarding the functions of various parts of their genitalia. This was certainly Vicki’s experience: “Our teacher just explained what each part of the body and girls’ anatomy was. But didn’t really tell us anything about what each thing was for.” Of course, adequate instruction on the clitoris would necessarily identify its function—purely pleasure. But because pleasure, especially children’s pleasure, is not organized in terms of generation and reproduction, it did not “merit a hearing” (Foucault 1984: 293). As several women recalled, the clitoris was “driven out, denied, and reduced to silence” (p. 293):

In seventh grade health class we went over the anatomy of the human body. I remember learning



about the vagina and the many parts of it, *but never was clitoris mentioned*. (Ann; emphasis added)

When I went through sex ed. in fifth grade we didn't even really learn what sex really was. We just learned about the parts of our anatomy—*excluding the clitoris*—and about periods and hygiene. (Sara; emphasis added)

Children are assumed to have “no sex, which is why they were forbidden to talk about it,” and this perhaps also explains why, in place of a curriculum that includes the clitoris, “a general and studied silence was imposed” (p. 293). Consequently, many women recalled entering and experiencing puberty and adolescence relatively uneducated about a significant component of their changing body, genitals, and sexuality. Indeed, despite the fact that nearly all the women in this study had been sexually active for quite some time, they commonly reported learning about the clitoris in their late teenage years—often as a college or university student—when discourses on sex have assumed the mantra of scientific propriety:

When I found out the name, the clitoris, I was seventeen yrs old. It happened in my biology class in college. . . . I don't remember discussing the sexual function of the clitoris. Mainly I found out this part of my genitals had a name. It wasn't until other college classes that I began to fully understand the concept of a clitoris. . . . Besides professors talking about it, the clitoris was included in some textbooks, supplemental reading, and magazines. All of this information made me realize that the clitoris is for pleasure and is biologically highly sensitive because of nerve endings. (Jennifer)

Women generally reported equal silence from parents. Vicki wrote, “I was actually never told anything about it from my parents.” For Jill, “it was never something that was talked about in my house, not even between my mom and I.” Although some parents were more willing to talk about sex, this did not necessarily mean they told their daughters about the parts that comprise their genitalia.

Sara recalled: “My parents were very open with me about sex, but they never focused on the actual parts of the vagina.” Parents were not alone in their discomfort with the subject; in some cases, young girls were themselves part of a coalition of evasion and avoidance. As Rebecca explained, “I wasn't comfortable talking to my parents about it, and they weren't comfortable talking to me about it.”

Foucault argued that silence and repression can only partially explain the rapport between sex, knowledge, and power. Similarly, symbolic clitoridectomy is marked as much by silence as by see-through-secrecy. In fact, discourses on sexuality and the clitoris are rather straightforwardly available in certain public arenas where sex can be safely administered (like university classrooms) or educational resources. Owing to this see-through-secrecy of a society that speaks “verbosely of its own silence” (Foucault 1984: 297), some parents relied on these other means of informing girls about their body and sexuality. Books, in particular, proved useful for Rebecca and her parents—a common recollection for the women in this study:

I remember when my sister and I were young, probably around the age of 9 or 10, our mother checked out a library book that taught young children about sex. When she showed us we were embarrassed and to make it worse, our father was there, which made us more uncomfortable. We didn't want to look at the book or talk about it. She put it under the couch and said that if we wanted to look at it we could. So, later that day I snuck it out from under the couch and took it into the bathroom and quickly looked at it. (Rebecca)

Although books may have proven helpful, they too provided a means of maintaining a vow of see-through-secrecy for parents and children alike. Books were relatively available, but girls were on their own to read them. Neither parents nor children seemingly needed to discuss the matter further. Still, the availability of books, in this case, enabled these women to learn about conceptualizations of the clitoris (although on the limitations



of these books, see Moore and Clarke 1995) and thus, as we show, provided them the chance to “exit” symbolic purgatory.

While parents were not always forthcoming, many women found adequate comfort in asking them questions or in *feeling* they could talk to them—mothers, in particular—if they had questions (even if they never recalled doing so). As Cheryl explained, “I always knew that if I wanted to know I could probably ask my mom, who was a nurse. . . . I knew I could go to my parents with specific questions.” And parents were sometimes quite helpful in assuring daughters who were sometimes confused about their changing bodies:

When I was young, I was very inquisitive about my body. I asked numerous questions and they were answered to the best of my parents’ abilities and comfort levels. I remember discovering my pubic hair one night while I lay in bed. I quickly rushed downstairs to ask my mother what it was and why it was there. She comforted me by saying it was natural and that eventually all girls have hair there. (Rebecca)

More than a quaint story, Rebecca’s mother was an important source of comforting knowledge during a time of change and apprehension. Indeed, “put[ting] sex into discourse” (Foucault 1984: 299) can be important for girls who, in the absence of other information, may worry unnecessarily about their bodies and sexual subjectivity. Vicki recalled an especially evocative memory:

I was very young, about four maybe, and I noticed it [clitoris] when I was getting dressed or something. I just remember thinking I was weird because I had bathed with my girl cousins and never remembered seeing theirs, and no one had ever told me anything about it. I got really confused about it, and eventually upset enough that I asked my mom about it. I was afraid that I must be part boy, and this was like a mini-penis or something. I remember being very concerned about what I was, if I was a boy/girl. My mom kind of giggled at me and told me I was 100% girl, and it was just a part of my vagina. And all girls had it.

Significantly, Vicki was “very concerned about what [she] was” because, even as a young girl, she was aware that boys have a penis; she was *not* aware that girls have a clitoris. Her anxiety stemmed from the fact that girls “are rarely taught the anatomical terms which differentiate parts of female genitalia (e.g., the clitoris, the inner and outer labia)—the word vagina covers the whole area” (Braun and Kitzinger 2001a: 155; also see Gartrell and Mosbacher 1984; Lerner 1976). The symbolic purgatory of the clitoris compelled Vicki to seek available discourses, appropriate *known* icons—a penis—and worry that what she discovered “was like a mini-penis.” Her clitoris was a part of her *corporeal* body, but not part of the body she conceptualized through language. By putting sex into discourse, her mother offered reassurances that restored order to Vicki’s purgatory and eased her anxiety about being “a boy/girl.”

Taking into account a genital disembodiment or alienation of children from their own bodies, as well as the relative silence, avoidance, and omissions of family and school, it is not surprising that women generally recalled growing up ignorant about their genitals. Indeed, almost none of our informants learned that their genitals were composed of various parts until well into their teenage years:

I think I was in college before I actually knew there were different parts. As for age, I would have to say between 17 and 19. (Jill)

My family had used “vagina” as the counterpart to “penis.” “Vagina” was everything a girl had “down there.” I knew it was a “third hole” (that was my only concept of what the vagina was, a hole meant to hold a penis and birth a baby). (Jessica)

Furthermore, by reproducing the existent “social regulation of the senses” (Jackson 1977: 209), ignorance persisted throughout women’s somatic careers. The majority of women in this study openly admitted that they *presently* do not know or understand the various parts of the vulva.



Jill wrote, "I feel like I don't know or understand the different parts of the vagina at all." Similarly, Ann wrote, "I don't feel I know the parts of female genitals very well . . . they look a lot different in real pictures than on drawings or models. . . . I don't know what all the parts do or what all their functions are." While Cheryl claimed to "know the various parts of women's genitals," she immediately added, "I probably wouldn't get them all right on a placement test." Indeed, owing to the colloquial use of "vagina" to refer to all the parts of the vulva, Rebecca was caught off-guard when we asked the question, "How well do you feel you understand the various parts that comprise women's genitals?"

I just reread this question and I'm unsure what it means. The vagina is composed of several different parts? I guess I never knew that. I feel a little ashamed to admit that and a little angry.

Rebecca was not alone in her embarrassment, or anger, as Sara explained:

This is embarrassing, but I don't feel like I know the different parts of my genitalia [*sic*] at all. I was never, not that I recollect, shown a diagram of a vagina until I came to college. . . . I wish that I knew more about women's anatomy, but it is embarrassing enough to not know these things in the first place.

The women in this study reported a vagueness, lack of knowledge, and even admitted outright ignorance about their genitals—"blind spots in women's knowledge of their bodies, arousal, and desires" (Plante 2006: 143). We recognize that "the implications in terms of those women's attitudes toward their own sexuality are serious" (Sanders and Robinson 1979: 228) and share Plante's (2006: 143) concern "that women may not know their bodies, may not have comfortable language to describe their bodies, and may not know their desires." These are the circumstances and conditions of symbolic clitoridectomy: a form of putting the clitoris under erasure not by way of sheer silencing but by a restrictive economy of discourse—among

other significant forces—that confines the clitoris in a symbolic purgatory.

### Discovering the Sensations of the Clitoris

I discovered the sensations of my clitoris long before I ever properly identified the organ, the source of all the magic. I was probably about 9 or 10. I had been playing around with myself—not really masturbating, just spelunking my "down there"—and I pulled back some flesh and discovered this amazingly sensitive little knob (it almost felt a little dangerous). It was this hidden, private thing that I gazed at with some hesitancy. My first thought was something along the lines of "What the hell is *that*!?"

Jessica

Women rarely acquired symbolic knowledge about the clitoris until their mid- to late teens but were seldom unaware (or innocent); many discovered "it" long before and were well acquainted with the pleasing sensations it provides. Because "children can recognize that touching their genitalia 'feels good'" (Plante 2006: 106), it is not surprising that many women recalled learning, as a child, that some parts of their genitalia felt more pleasurable than others. As Jill reported,

I discovered my clitoris when I was in third grade. So I was probably about eight. I didn't really know what was going on. I just knew that when I touched a certain spot it would feel really different than when I would touch other places. This discovery usually came along when I couldn't sleep at night.

Several women gave similar testimonials; clitoral sensations were often something they pleasingly discovered entirely for themselves in confidential, clandestine somatic explorations—often during rest-less nights or in the bathtub—circumstances that provided a measure of privacy, easy access to the genitals, and perhaps motivation as well. . . .

Although unaware that "it" had a name, by discovering its pleasing sensations many women



"had" (Dewey [1922] 2002) some of its meanings. In this way, the body *makes sense* because, in part, the body *is sense* (Vannini and Waskul 2006). While "it" may lack symbolic meaning, it is bountiful with the iconic meaning and the "qualitative immediacy" that the body provides. Bodily awareness may be hidden or disappear from consciousness until a "sensory intensification" (Leder 1990: 71) takes place, allowing body parts "waiting like tools in a box to be used by conscious resolve" (Dewey [1922] 2002: 25). This is precisely what Kari reported: "I guess I could say I was little, like ten or eleven when I discovered the good feeling of it being rubbed. . . . I *knew what 'it' was before I knew it was a clitoris*" (emphasis added). Experience cannot be understood through language alone; the body is a site of preobjective knowledge (Dewey [1934] 1958, [1922] 2002). As Frank (1995: 27) suggests, "The body is not mute, but it is inarticulate; it does not use speech but it begets it." This form of linguistically "pre-reflexive experience" (Csordas 1990: 6) proved equally true for women who reported discovering their clitoris by accident. Danielle recalled her discovery:

The first time I remember having sensations, I was probably nine or ten yrs old, between fourth and fifth grade. I was climbing a pole on the playground and it felt good to climb upwards. I don't remember knowing or understanding what it meant at the time, just that it felt good. I remember not wanting anyone to know why I liked it, although I recall a girlfriend teasing me, so I figured she "knew" too. I don't recall too much from elementary and junior high [school] but I'm guessing I was about fourteen or fifteen when I was using a back massager and it fell into my lap. I suddenly realized what "that" feeling was. I knew I had a clit by then, but probably still had not been told that it was for pleasure. I put the massager away and tried to forget about what happened, but the next time I was home alone I decided to explore more. This is when I discovered that the vibrations felt the best on my clit. I liked it but I didn't want anyone to know.

As is apparent in Danielle's account, some women did not recall so freely exploring their body as a child. Both Beth and Sara did not discover the pleasures of their clitoris until a book motivated carnal exploration. As Beth explained:

I had begun reading more mature books that had sex in them, and it made me curious. So I started to experiment touching myself. I was in my bed at night and it was a new and thrilling experience. . . . I believe I was in early junior high. . . . I couldn't believe that my body could feel like that and that I had gone so long without knowing it existed.

Beth was surprised that she "had gone so long without knowing it existed," which is understandable considering that "the possibility of pleasure is literally in [her] own hands" (Plante 2006: 144), and always had been.

### Symbolic Purgatory

A sensation is only pleasurable or enjoyable, not in itself, but in the context of the meaning of the activity in which it is embedded.

Robert Solomon, "Sexual Paradigms" (1997)

Women generally discovered the pleasures of the clitoris long before they knew it had a name, a circumstance we have described as *symbolic purgatory*. Like Cheryl below, several women remarked on this gap between somatic discovery and discursive knowledge:

I didn't learn about the clitoris specifically until ninth grade (age fourteen). Before that I had learned about the female genitalia in a rather broad sense. I knew there was more to the female genitalia than just a vagina (learned from general discussion with my family/parents, not really any specific age), but I didn't know what each part was called. In ninth grade health class, my teacher passed out very detailed diagram pictures with everything labeled for both female and male genitalia. . . . In the back of my mind, I vaguely connected the clitoris to the specific part that gave me the most pleasure.



Until learning that their “special spot” is a clitoris, some women—like Sara—“just assumed that it was a part of the vagina but with no specific name.” Other women, like Ann, “had no idea other people had a spot like this that felt good to touch.” As we have suggested, somatic discovery is a sensual and carnal source of both meaning and information for the embodied self. However, somatic discovery is not entirely language free. For example, our informants often used the euphemism “down there”—with all its connotations of everything sexual, naughty, mysterious, unspeakable, devious, and so forth—and this clearly illustrates how the clitoris is neither confined to discursive darkness nor basking in symbolic transparency. The clitoris inhabits an intermediate state (a purgatory), awaiting linguistic conceptualization, which is evident in Cheryl’s recollection: “I knew for many years that it wasn’t just a vagina but [I] never really concerned myself with more than that” (emphasis added). A similar waiting for discursive cues is equally apparent in the accounts of Jessica and Diana:

I always knew there was more going on “down there” than just a hole, but *until I was given names and info for the different parts I never really thought much about them.* (Jessica; emphasis added)

I don’t think I ever consciously thought about “the thing down there” *until I learned it had a name.* Once it had a name it was something ok; something more real. (Diana; emphasis added)

The relative muting of the clitoris is all the more significant because, as Rebecca claimed, “it [clitoris] does bring me great sexual pleasure, and when I think about it I usually think about the pleasure I get from it.” More than mere vocabulary, language may well constitute a lexicon for experience, in this case the experience of pleasure.

Despite a certain kind of will to discursive knowledge (Foucault 1979), many women remained incapable of finding a label (see Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor 1995) for the clitoris for extended periods of time. For example, Jill wrote,

“I’m not even sure I fully understood what a clitoris was until I was almost out of high school.” Jill’s recollection of uncertainty was consistent with the accounts of many women in this study who also reported a period of vagueness:

Even after finding out its name (in biology class) there was still the vagueness of the concept. (Jennifer)

The first time I ever heard the word clitoris was in my seventh grade health class. . . . [W]e got a very academic lesson of the female anatomy, but it took me a while to realize the clitoris on the diagram was the same piece of flesh that I would touch at night. (Beth)

In some cases, women reported learning of their clitoris from peers.<sup>2</sup> As Rochelle explained, she learned of her clitoris in the “later part of high school, from friends my age (mostly the guys talked about it, never the girls).” But her understanding was vague and confused; having heard “the guys talk about it” in reference to oral sex, Rochelle admits, “I didn’t know what the clitoris had to do with ‘eating out.’”

It was popular media sources that most commonly provided the knowledge that “it” is a clitoris—a telling instance of a society that disguises truth in secrecy while also generating multiple discourses through which secrets can be discovered (Foucault 1979). Jill explained, “No one really told me what it was, I just suddenly put my masturbating sensations together with these words that I kept hearing. I think *Sunday Night Sex Talk* helped me come to the realization.” At least Jill recalled learning about her clitoris from a relatively accurate and reliable media source—*Sunday Night Sex Talk* is a cable broadcast featuring a registered nurse-cum-sex expert. Two women reported learning their “special spot” was called a clitoris from an episode of the cartoon *South Park*. Ann wrote:

It is incredibly strange how I learned that my “special” spot was called the clitoris. I had been sexually active for a while and knew that when the spot was “rubbed” right I would orgasm. I was watching



either an episode of or the movie *South Park* and the one character said something about how if you couldn't find a girl's clit you would be a bad boyfriend. This connected in my brain and I formally learned that this place I had been touching for so long and gave me so much pleasure had a name. . . .

Women were generally relieved to learn "it" was a clitoris. Since language is a cultural stockpile of accepted meaning and truth, simply knowing "it" has a name validates and legitimizes both the clitoris and a young woman's body, femininity, and sexuality. A word renders the clitoris a significant symbol—which is significant, indeed:

I had spent months pleasuring myself before I learned what exactly I was using to do it. It was kind of nice to know my body was working properly. (Beth)

I remember looking down there and kind of wondering about it, to find out later that it felt good, and then had a name. I think I was surprised that it had its own name. It was kind of nice to be able to label it though, and know that it was different from everything else down there. I was excited but embarrassed that I "knew." (Danielle)

Similarly, Ann wrote, "It was a relief to finally know the name." However, Ann also understandably added, "I already knew it was normal, but I thought it was strange I had never learned its function." Her clitoris had been a part of her body all her life, she had already discovered its wonderful pleasures, and yet she was denied basic anatomical knowledge. More than just "strange," some women were resentful:

As I became aware, I also became resentful because I realized that the clitoral information/definition was kept from me on purpose. This is knowledge that everyone knows, but no one discusses—that frustrates me. (Jennifer) . . .

### The Uses of Somatic Pleasure

[As a child] I used to play with my whole genital region trying to figure out what everything was. I

remember that my clitoris was played with more; probably because it felt good. I do remember feeling shameful. My knowledge of sex told me that little girls don't play with themselves. I think that moment has extended through my whole life and dictates my sexual insecurities. I always played with myself in secret cause I was afraid of the consequences of getting caught. This lent a guilty pleasure aspect to sex and the clitoris as a whole.

Cindy

Considering the combined and cumulative effects of symbolic clitoridectomy and the stigma traditionally associated with masturbation—especially among children (Ajzenstadt and Cavaglion 2002)—it is small wonder the clitoris was kept in relative darkness for most of the women in this study. But, as we also illustrated, that darkness is not absolute; the whole area "down there" is shrouded in secrecy and yet subject to becoming visible through a multitude of discourses. This is why women reported—or at least recalled, which is just as significant—discovering their clitoris in circumstances of combined ignorant pleasure and shameful carnal knowledge:

I always thought I was doing something bad, I thought you shouldn't touch yourself in "inappropriate places." I would touch it almost nightly for many years. I think I stopped around 14 or 15 just because I thought it was dirty and I was doing something wrong. (Ann)

I think I started masturbating or playing with myself at age 9, roughly. I maybe did it a couple times a year if that. As I grew up it interested me more and I did it more. I remember it as my deepest most dirty secret though and I swore I would never tell anyone about what I did. My body wasn't something to be ashamed of, but what I thought about and did was. (Diana)

In view of the relative silence combined with a multitude of confessional discourses that dominate women's understandings of their genitals, it is not particularly surprising that young women who



decide to try masturbation might not know what to do. As Sara recalled:

I remember specifically the first time I masturbated. I was in tenth grade and there was all this hype surrounding this masturbation thing for girls. I asked my friend what it was so I went home and tried it that night. I had no idea what I was doing so I just kinda felt around my vagina. I didn't do any clitoral stimulation (I don't think I had an understanding of what "it" was at the time), I just put my fingers in my vagina. I really didn't get a sense of enjoyment from masturbation at that time so I didn't do it again until I was in college.<sup>3</sup>

Having put off masturbation until her college years, Sara effectively denied herself opportunities to learn about the organ she would *later* discover and regard as the epicenter of her sexuality. Sara wrote that, once she was in college,

One of my friends bought me a cheap vibrator as a joke for my birthday, and it ended up being the best thing she could have done for me! I decided one night that I would give the new toy a whirl, and I had never been so sexually satisfied. I would say that I masturbate 2–3 times a week now. If I didn't rediscover masturbation I probably wouldn't have such a good sex life. I figured out what I liked and what I needed to be satisfied both alone and with my partner.

Sara's narrative is common for the women in this study; negotiating the shame and guilt associated with masturbation is a common experience, as women acquire knowledge of and about their own bodily desires and claim ownership of their clitoris and sexuality. As Smith (1987: 49) notably remarked, women's daily/nightly embodied experiences are "embedded within the particular historical forms of social relations that determine that experience." Thus it is not surprising that some women overcome alienation and reclaim the meanings of their own somatic experiences by "learning the technique" (Becker 1963: 46–48) or, in Foucauldian terms, by applying the right

technology of care of the self to the desired use of pleasure (Foucault 1988, 1990). For example, Beth reported overcoming her shame and discovering important virtues of masturbation:

[My] attitude has changed. Currently I masturbate almost every single day. I do not think that people should be afraid of or ashamed to masturbate. It is safe and allows people to gain a better understanding of their own bodies, which is particularly useful when teaching a partner how to pleasure you.

Certainly, some women apparently never touched their clitoris, which they discovered in the throes of a sexual encounter. Conversely, for other women in this study, the sensitivity and precise location of their clitoris allows for sensations that are not necessarily dependent on direct manipulation. For example, Jessica learned to "perceive the effects" (Becker 1963: 48–53) of her clitoris on regular occasions, both "tingly reminders" during routine daily activities as well as some secrets that are perhaps best kept:

I'd say I "encounter" my clitoris as an organ of sexual pleasure several times a day. By that, I mean not just self-stimulation but also the average day-to-day sensations of sitting in class, walking to work, taking a shower and getting tingly reminders. This often occurs when I'm bored—for example, while sitting through a long, dull lecture—and it's like my body's way of telling me that there's still some fun to be had in the world. It's quite nice actually. Kegel exercises coupled with a good fantasy takes the horror out of a 3-hour class. And no one ever knows!

Similarly, Cheryl wrote, "I'm lucky enough to have a fairly accessible clitoris, and simply wearing the right fit of jeans can almost bring me to a minor orgasm." Nonetheless, the majority of the women in this study discovered the pleasures of the clitoris primarily through clandestine exploration of their genitals and masturbation—activities that continue to carry significant stigma and taboo (Ogletree and Ginsburg 2000)—and thus require active (re)negotiations of competing somatic rules.



"Any sensory experience," Carpenter (1973: 20) writes, "is partly a skill and any skill can be cultivated." Thus, for many women in this study, cultivating the uses of pleasure—or in Becker's (1963: 53–58) words, "learning to enjoy the effects"—overcoming the shame of masturbation, and becoming comfortable touching their own clitoris, proved instrumental in their narrative of personal reckoning with the symbolic purgatory of the clitoris. Indeed, women who shed old somatic rules about masturbation and self-touching often cited enthusiastic benefits of masturbation, namely, the acquisition of useful carnal knowledge:

That [shame of masturbation] changed as I grew up too. I was 19 when I bought my first vibrator, and even then I "was buying it as a joke for someone else." I had wanted one so much sooner. Now I have 2 of them—had 3 but one wore out! My attitude has changed since then. Now my attitude is very open. I'm open about the fact that I do it, that I like it, that I own vibrators, and what I think about it all. (Diana)

Considering all the ways that the clitoris is muted and potentially colonized by others, it is understandable why Jessica so ardently wrote, "Masturbation, for me, is an act of revolution, an act of defiance, and an act of ungodly enjoyment. I'd recommend it to anyone." An act of revolution and defiance, indeed; in masturbation women not only flick a defiant finger at a taboo but also directly act toward and interact with their clitoris—in defiance of prevailing somatic rules, symbolic purgatory, and symbolic clitoridectomy. In short, women masturbate because it feels good. Yet in masturbation women also interact with their clitoris *on their own terms* and, in the process, potentially evoke important components of their body, sexuality, femininity, and self. It is in this sense that women's somatic work is a "technique of the body" (Mauss [1934] 1973: 75). Body techniques, Mauss suggests, share three basic characteristics: they are techniques, in that they rely on the operation of certain movements or forms of experience; they

are traditional, in that they are acquired through practice or socialization; and they are efficient, in that they are oriented toward fulfilling a goal or function.

## Conclusion

It is interesting, but somewhat disturbing, to note the strong tendency for women to report they remain silent and do not refer to their own genitals.

Janet S. Sanders and William L. Robinson, "Talking and Not Talking about Sex: Male and Female Vocabularies" (1979)

Exploring the hidden complexities of being female is a damn edgy thing to do, and it takes a certain amount of guts and determination.

Jessica

Broadly reflecting on our findings, we note two key conclusions. On the one hand, the women in this study illustrated the consequences of symbolic clitoridectomy and the validity of its many critics and criticisms (see Bennett 1993; Braun and Kitzinger 2001a, 2001b; Braun and Wilkinson 2001; Moore and Clarke 1995; Ogletree and Ginsburg 2000; Scheper-Hughes 1991). Symbolic clitoridectomy creates conditions in which the clitoris is a part of a woman's *corporeal* body while simultaneously excised from her *conceptual* body. If we define the "conceptual body" as an abstraction that subsists of significant symbols (primarily language and discourse), then it is also a social structure of knowledge and stock cultural schemas that inform, organize, and configure carnal and sensual experiences. Indeed, as the women in this study candidly reported, the erasure of the clitoris from their conceptual body did not necessarily prevent the carnal discovery of clitoral pleasures, but it did render the clitoris mute, inarticulate, a symbolic terrain that others may occupy—or some combination thereof.

On the other hand, the women in this study equally illustrated that the body may be inscribed by discourse—but it is also made meaningful in



action, transaction, and practice even when the symbolic resources to do so are scarce or contradictory. Sensation is, by definition, emergent from acts of sense making. Thus, as the women in this study illustrated, subjectivity—in this case, sensual embodiment—does not exist prior to experience but flows from it. Further, an object's meanings—including a body part and sensations associated with it—reside not in the object itself but in the interaction or transaction of conduct directed toward it and the qualities emanating from it (Dewey [1934] 1958; Mead 1934; also see McCarthy 1984). Indeed, the women in this study are neither “cultural dupes” nor passive victims of symbolic clitoridectomy but active agents who reflexively made and make meaning of their body and its sensual experiences.

Thus the central dynamic that characterized women's recollections of the discovery of their clitoris is a negotiation between the potential to *sense* the qualitative immediacy of the body and the ability to *make sense* of the see-through-secrecies of symbolic purgatory. Both immediate carnal knowledge and emergent and shifting discourses characterize this negotiation. Perceiving the clitoris, using it, naming it, and understanding the significance of the discourses surrounding it is a complex and emergent biographical process: a *career*, if you will, of somatic discovery.

### Notes

1. A clear and pertinent example of what we mean by symbolic clitoridectomy and related conditions of symbolic purgatory is expressed in Foucault's four “great strategic unities” of power/knowledge on and about sexuality. According to Foucault, tactics deployed in the political struggle against children's masturbation resulted in a “pedagogization” of children's sexuality and therefore in its productive constitution as a subject of knowledge and discourse. Pedagogization is thus not a case of repression; “what this actually entail[s], throughout this whole secular campaign that mobilized the adult world around the sex of children, [is] using these tenuous pleasures as a drop, constituting them as

*secrets* (that is, forcing them into hiding so as to make possible their discovery)” (Foucault 1979: 43; emphasis added).

2. Other women also reported a similar silence among peers. Even after learning “it” is a clitoris, many women in this study do not recall ever mentioning it again; they were already acculturated to a norm of silence and committed to maintaining it. Indeed, as Diana (age twenty-two) reflects: “[After learning it is called a clitoris,] I still never referred to it openly to anyone—even as I grew up and my girl friends and I would talk about boys and things we did with our boyfriends. I don't think I remember any of us referring to it by name.”
3. Sara's account vividly illustrates how sensory skill acquisition is achieved via a process that Leder (1990: 351) coined “incorporation,” a “bring[ing] within a body”: “A skill [that] is finally and fully learned when something that once was extrinsic, grasped only through explicit rules of example, now comes to pervade . . . corporeality.” Similarly, in Dewey's ([1922] 2002: 126) words, we can understand incorporation as the process whereby acquired habits are reorganized and “modified . . . by redirection of impulses.”

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### Reflective Questions

1. How did the authors recruit participants, get consent, and collect data for their study? Why did they engage in such elaborate procedures?
2. In what ways is the clitoris in symbolic purgatory? How is the corporeal body different from the conceptual body? What is symbolic clitoridectomy?
3. When did women learn about their clitoris, and where did they learn it from? Generate a list of the terms you learned for genitalia while growing up. Then, rank the terms according to which your family and friends preferred you use the most to those preferred the least. Was slang favored? By whom? Why? Where did clitoris, vulva, inner and outer labia appear on your list? How did that compare to penis, testicles, and vas deferens? How did your upbringing affect your comfort with reading this article? Would you have been more comfortable reading about male genitalia and sexuality? Why or why not? Why do the authors consider fully naming female genitalia to be important? How did girls'/women's lack of terminology for the clitoris shape their sexual experiences?
4. Perhaps you have read or seen Eve Ensler's play *Vagina Monologues*. If not, take twenty minutes to view some Internet clips of performances at [http://www.ted.com/talks/eve\\_ensler\\_on\\_happiness\\_in\\_body\\_and\\_soul.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/eve_ensler_on_happiness_in_body_and_soul.html), where Ensler reflects on the *Vagina Monologues* and V-Day, a social movement to stop violence against women. Which of Ensler's comments draw laughter and why? What role does humor play in symbolic clitoridectomy? What cultural factors influence women's interpretations of sexuality as pleasurable or painful? Now watch Sarah Jones's performance of "Your Revolution" at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRgIGMwZd2o&feature=related>. Where did Jones get her lyrics from and how did she remix them? How does popular culture shape women's understandings of their bodies? What cultural materials do women appropriate, reshape, or cultivate to create new ones?



## Corporate Logo Tattoos and the Commodification of the Body

ANGELA OREND AND PATRICIA GAGNÉ

*This selection addresses a question that has become central to sociologists who investigate the relationship between culture and the body—that is, do people simply conform to social and cultural pressures when altering or modifying the appearance of their bodies, or do they actively and creatively make choices in this process? In answering this question, Angela Orend and Patricia Gagné examine why individuals elect to get their body tattooed with a corporate logo, such as a Harley Davidson emblem. They also consider whether such an act is a reflection of personal autonomy or an example of the increased commodification of culture and the pervasive power of consumer capitalism.*

*Drawing on in-depth interviews, Orend and Gagné note that their respondents emphasized the personal freedom and choices they exercised in getting a corporate logo tattoo. When explaining why they chose to mark their bodies in this way, they stressed a variety of personal motivations, each of which suggests that they transformed the symbols presented to them by the culture industry to fit their own goals, such as their desire to communicate brand loyalty, group membership, and a preferred lifestyle. Orend and Gagné found that most of their interviewees believed that getting a corporate logo tattoo was a sign of rebellion, demonstrating their individuality as well as their resistance to the commodification of culture and everyday life. Ironically, however, their interviewees*

*did not see others' tattoos as marks of genuine or effective rebellion. Instead, they thought others used them to fit in or "be cool."*

*Based on their findings, Orend and Gagné evaluate whether their respondents are more right about themselves or others with respect to corporate tattoos and resistance. In doing so, they consider the ideas of postmodern theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, who asserted that the mass production of signs in postmodern society has resulted in a crisis of identity and a loss of meaning, marked by the lack of connection between signs and their original referents. Like other signs, tattoos have become "commodities on display" that reflect the growing commodification of culture and the body. As Orend and Gagné observe, the increased popularity of corporate logo tattoos reflects this trend. It also illustrates how corporations have extended their effectiveness at branding us as individuals, thereby recruiting us to serve as "walking human billboards."*

*Orend and Gagné conclude that their respondents are not expressing as much autonomy or resistance as they think when getting a corporate logo tattoo. Despite their best efforts, these individuals cannot effectively invert the meanings associated with their corporate logo tattoos, largely because others interpret these tattoos in light of the discourse of corporate capitalism. That is, others read the corporate logo tattoos as free*

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advertising rather than as expressions of resistance or individuality. Orend and Gagné correspondingly propose that we are not as free or rebellious as we might think when engaging in body modifications such as tattooing. Indeed, we may be playing right into the hands of corporate advertisers when getting a tattoo, making ourselves into their servants and promoters even though we are doing so under the guise of expressing resistance and personal agency.

Overall, the authors of this selection offer a perspective that differs somewhat from the viewpoint articulated in most of the previous selections. While acknowledging that we actively construct and negotiate meanings for self, Orend and Gagné contend that these meanings are profoundly influenced by the larger culture industry and the rapidly expanding commodification of culture. In turn, they propose that while we may believe we have the power to define ourselves and resist the culture industry when we engage in practices such as tattooing, the culture industry is the source of that power and thus subverts our resistance. For example, the rebellion that we might seek to express through getting a Harley Davidson tattoo is a commodity produced by the culture industry and corporate capitalism. By purchasing that commodity, we are not expressing real resistance or power. Rather, we are embracing the commodification of our body and reinforcing the cultural and economic systems that promote that process. We are correspondingly buying into the dominant culture rather than resisting it.

Since the late 1960s, Western popular culture has witnessed a resurgence in the practice of body modification, particularly with respect to the popularity of tattoos. An under-recognized but socially salient aspect of this trend has been the growing popularity of permanent corporate logo tattoos. At the turn of the century, for example, Harley was the most widespread corporate logo tattoo in North America (Sheldon, Godward, and DeLongis 2001), with the popularity of logo tattoos expanding to include others, such as Nike, Adidas, Budweiser, Corona, Apple, Ford, Chevy, and Volkswagen, just to name a few (Klein 1999;

C. Magill, personal communication). The growing popularity of corporate logo tattoos led one observer to remark that such body art was “the ultimate in chic” (Bradberry 1997, F1).

Little research has examined the rising popularity of corporate logo tattoos, although the literature on tattoos in general provides some insight into this new trend of body modification. This research, together with the sociology of the body and consumption, informs our analysis of the growing popularity of corporate logo tattoos. We situate our data analysis within the literature on the body and consumer culture, which is divided on whether bodily modifications in general are the result of passive actors succumbing to commodification and social pressures to conform (Foucault 1978; Turner 1992, 1996) or whether those who modify their bodies are active agents in an exercise of power (Bakhtin 1968; Featherstone 1991; Frank 1991). Thus, we seek to answer our main research questions: What are the meanings that those who acquire corporate logo tattoos ascribe to them and what motivates some individuals to inscribe themselves with a corporate symbol? Are corporate logo tattoos a form of resistance against the “culture industry” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1976), are they a manifestation of the commodification of the body, or, following the theoretical lead of Patricia Hill Collins (2000), are they “both” the former “and” the latter? This research adds to previous scholarship by situating an analysis of corporate logo tattoos within the literature on the sociology of the body and consumption. . . .

### **Tattoo Consumers: Rebellious or Commodified Bodies?**

Although social scientists generally agree that the body is socially constructed, [they] disagree as to whether those who alter their bodies are passively “duped” into conforming to social and cultural pressures or whether they are active agents in constructing their own bodies (Chapkis 1986; Davis 1995; Douglas 1966; Mulvey 1989). Douglas (1966) maintains that the body is a metaphor for the social



system, in which the physical body is an expression of culturally imposed meanings.

By contrast, Frank (1991, 46) argues that social bodies are the result of individual agency. Similarly, Davis (1995) contends that women's use of cosmetic surgery is an act of agency. One way of theoretically making sense of this debate is to draw on the work of Michel Foucault. In some of his work, he argues that the body is "docile" (Foucault 1995), constructed by "a great many distinct regimes" and that it is "the prisoner of culture" (Foucault 1986, 380) that can only be achieved "through a strict regimen of disciplinary action" (Foucault 1995, 136). Foucault argues that the social exercise of power over bodies is carried but through the "panopticon," a metaphor for the way that institutions constantly watch and seek to control people via surveillance methods. Similar to Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, Foucault contends that the power of the panopticon is exercised as people self-regulate. The power of such self-regulation has been empirically demonstrated in the research literature (Chapkis 1986; Davis 1995; Mulvey 1989; Gagné and McGaughey 2002).

One of the difficulties of applying a Foucauldian perspective to an analysis of embodiment is that Foucault (1978, 95) also argued that because power is exercised discursively, "where there is power, there is resistance." Thus, power is not a zero-sum game in which certain agents have it and others do not. Instead, it is diffused in society. Accordingly, people are not passively manipulated into internalizing dominant ideologies, nor do they lose agency as they are pressured by bodily discourse and regimens. For Foucault (1978, 95), because the "body is invested in power relations" it can also express "body power," not as "property, but as strategy" (Foucault 1995, 26).

Applying this Foucauldian perspective, some researchers argue that consumers are not uncritical, passive victims of the capitalist system. Rather, they engage in a discursive exercise of power during consumption (Twitchell 1999). In this vein, advertising and marketing are viewed as reflecting,

rather than dictating, the desires of consumers, with consumption offering control over communal meanings ascribed to self and social relations and opportunities to exercise power as shoppers decide which products to buy in the "democracy" of the marketplace (Fiske 1989). Fiske (1989) argues that consumers are engaged in acts of resistance when they alter the intended meanings and uses of commodities.

Thus, we are left with the question whether consumers of corporate logo tattoos have been "duped" into branding their bodies with capitalist insignia, whether they use them as signs of resistance, or if the acquisition of such body art is "both" an expression of a commodity self "and" a form of resistance to the commodification of culture.

### Research Method

The data for this article come from qualitative ethnographic observation and fieldwork in tattoo parlors, thirteen in-depth semistructured interviews, and eight conversational interviews. . . .

The first author conducted all of the interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. By using field observation at local tattoo parlors in addition to semi-structured and conversational interviewing methods, she was able to add or delete questions based on the information generated during the interview in addition to gaining a "first hand" look at the context of local tattoo parlors (Lofland and Lofland 1984; Werner and Schoepfle 1987). She conducted thirteen interviews using standard semistructured interview methods with eight interviews face-to-face, three by telephone, and two via an online chat service. She taperecorded all but the online interviews and took notes on the setting and context (Lofland and Lofland 1984; Patton 1990). She conducted most of the eight additional unrecorded conversational interviews in tattoo parlors, recording field notes after the conversations. . . .

In addition to demographic questions and those about the number, type, and bodily location of the subjects' tattoos, our interview guide focused on the history of each tattoo, including



the decision-making process before getting each one and what it meant to the subject. We also included questions soliciting opinions about the social acceptability of tattoos, why most people get them, why the subject acquired his or her tattoo(s), whether the subject had any other body modifications, and, if so, what kind. Following those questions, the interviewer focused similar inquiries on the respondent's corporate logo tattoo and what the company and the logo meant to him or her.

### Sample

We used a purposive criterion sampling method, designed to select "information-rich cases for in-depth study" (Patton 1990, 168) to recruit and sample research subjects. Toward that end, the first author placed flyers at local tattoo parlors; coffee shops, restaurants, stores, and bars; and two universities in a mid-sized Midwestern city. In addition, she placed an advertisement in the entertainment section of a free alternative local newspaper and posted a notice about the study on numerous Internet newsgroups, listservers, and chat rooms.

We used the following criteria to determine which tattoos to include and exclude: (1) the logo must be an official trademark (™) or a federally registered (®) symbol of a corporation or a name-brand product and (2) the tattoo must be permanent. We excluded tattoos of band names, album covers, cartoon characters, college or university symbols, sports teams, and other noncorporate logos. Of the twenty-one respondents included in this study, the first author documented the following corporate logo tattoos: Apple (5), Harley Davidson (2), Louisville Slugger (2), Nike (2), and one of each of the following: Churchill Downs (horse racing track), Cat's Meow (New Orleans bar), Crayola, Hershey Kiss, IBM, Ironman (body fitness company), Fender (guitar company), Lego, Pearl (drum company), and a combined tattoo that included Real (dairy corporation) with *Life* (magazine) which read "RealLife." We stopped recruiting subjects when we reached a point of theoretical saturation (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

### Meaning and Motivations: Corporate Logo Tattoos

Two primary themes emerged from our data regarding the motivations and meanings respondents ascribed to their own corporate logo tattoos. Fifteen respondents said their motivation to get the tattoo was brand loyalty and that, for them, the logo signified personal and group identity as well as adherence to a lifestyle associated with the brand. The second major theme, the simulacrum (Baudrillard 1995), as expressed by six respondents, was the intent to appropriate the logo and to "play" with the meanings the brand represented. In the following section we discuss those motivated by brand loyalty before turning to those who altered the original meaning of the logo.

### Brand Loyalty, Identity, Community, and Lifestyle

The key to understanding the most common motivation for getting a corporate logo tattoo is consumers' belief in the meanings behind the symbols. In addition to signifying brand loyalty, our respondents' logo tattoos commonly conveyed individual and group identity, lifestyle, and, for some, membership in a community created by marketers.

### Identity

Postmodernists argue that the commodification of culture is made possible, in part, by the fragmentation of society (DeBord 1995; Jameson 1991; Root 1996). Specifically, as individual identities are less rooted in kinship and geographic communities, individuals are influenced by consumer culture to believe that they can purchase individual and group identity through the products they buy. Just as consumers believe that the products they purchase say something about who they are, our brand-loyal respondents reported that their logo tattoos represented something about their social identities. For example, Apple #3 said, "People know me as a Mac guy. There are few things that



I'm always gonna be known for, and that's absolutely one of them." . . .

#### Group Identity and Community

Individual identity was situated within commodified collective identities and communities. Just as our respondents were motivated by brand loyalty and a desire to communicate individual identity to others, they fetishized the logo, buying into the ideology created by the culture industry. This commodification of group identity is similar to "consumer tribes" (Maffesoli 1996). Those with Apple tattoos, for example, believed that users of that computer brand were inherently more creative and "hip" than PC users and that Apple computers were technologically superior to all others. Apple #2, for example, stated as fact that Apple is "the most technologically advanced computer maker" and that the company had "changed the world." He continued, "I am an Apple freak. . . . I live and die by my Mac." Similarly, those with Harley tattoos believed that owners of that brand of motorcycle were more rebellious and free than owners of other brands or non-riders. Lego's tattoo signified his heavy involvement with the "Lego community," groups of people who create robots and other items with Lego blocks, whom he deemed more creative than others. Given that logos and the meanings they represent are created by corporate marketers, such tattoos appear to signify the commodification or "branding" (Klein 1999; Travis 2000) of individual and group identity.

Although not the only source of identity and community among our respondents, corporations appear to have affected their patterns of association. Among our respondents, corporate logo tattoos signified membership in groups that, according to Maffesoli (1996, 9) were "organized around the catchwords, brand names and sound bites of consumer culture." Maffesoli found that membership in consumer tribes was impermanent and fluid. For our respondents, the permanent inscription of signifiers of group membership onto the body connoted relatively permanent membership in the

tribe. For most, the inscription of the logo onto their bodies served to reinforce that loyalty, though not in a way that ensured lifelong allegiance. When loyalty diminished or one no longer wished to affiliate with the tribe, such sentiments could be difficult to communicate, particularly when the logo was tattooed on a part of the body difficult to cover.

#### Lifestyle

In addition to identity, community, and personal history, the logo of a particular corporation signified participation in a lifestyle that included, but frequently moved beyond, one particular brand. The logo was deemed to be the ultimate signifier of the lifestyle in which our participants engaged. For example, Churchill Downs said that horse racing was "the one obsession in my life." He believed that the Churchill Downs race track, home of the Kentucky Derby, hosted the world's ultimate race, but his lifestyle centered on horse racing, in general. Rather than getting a race horse and jockey or another non-logo tattoo to signify his passion for the sport, he chose the track's logo, explaining that it "shows my dedication, not just to Churchill Downs, but to horse racing. . . . It's symbolic of the love I have for the industry." Similarly, Ironman's logo tattoo and the corporation itself represented "people who live an active lifestyle" and were "hard core" dedicated athletes. Rather than a tattoo of himself crossing a finish line, he chose the corporate logo to commemorate the completion of his first triathlon. He explained, "When I got it, I didn't think of it as a corporate symbol. It was more of an accomplishment I made." Similarly, Cat's Meow got the tattoo of a "Hurricane," a pseudonym for the drink for which a particular New Orleans bar was famous. He said that he got "shitfaced" (drunk) and "had a really good time" while on vacation in that city. He explained that the Hurricane tattoo represented "just having a good time," the open-mindedness of the city, and his participation in a lifestyle he described as "people who enjoy being an alcoholic or a drunk," a category in which he included himself.



Among our sample, individuals who harbored greater sentiment for a particular activity than allegiance to a particular company thought of their lifestyles in corporate terms. Although all of our brand-loyal respondents were heavily influenced by a reality constructed by corporations, we believe that those who used the logo to signify their participation in a particular lifestyle most strongly suggest the hegemonic power of corporate symbols. The fact that some respondents do not “think of it as a corporate symbol” suggests the discursive power of marketing. In the next section, we analyze data from six respondents who endeavored to appropriate corporate logos and redefine them to signify something other than the meanings marketed by the corporations.

### Appropriating the Logo

Six of our respondents said they used logos to convey meanings other than those intended by the corporations they represented and had expressed no “brand loyalty,” per se. Of our formal interviews, those respondents were *RealLife*, IBM, Crayola, Hershey Kiss, and both Louisville Sluggers. Use of logos to signify something other than their intended meaning may be more common among the population of individuals with such tattoos than our sample suggests. According to several tattoo artists we spoke to, many clients request tattoos because they like the artistic style of the logo and not necessarily because of any specified “meaning” of the brand insignia.

Three themes emerged among those who wished to co-opt the logo to signify something other than that intended by the corporation. These included resistance to corporate loyalty, membership in a violent subculture, and the simulacrum.

### Corporate Resistance

IBM (a pseudonym) had worked for a company with a strong corporate culture that demanded absolute loyalty from its employees. It was only after securing a job with another company that he acquired a tattoo of the IBM logo. He explained

that getting the tattoo was a way of provoking his highly competitive coworkers, each of whom was concerned about demonstrating corporate loyalty. IBM explained that his tattoo “was sort of an in-your-face challenge to the real strutting monkeys in that organization: ‘Hey, I like [IBM] so much that I tattooed the logo on my arm. And by the way, I’m outta here.’” He got his tattoo as a form of rebellion against the “corporate types” because he was “frustrated with all the super-egos.” For him the tattoo was “more about the appearance of loyalty,” a way of telling his coworkers how ridiculous he thought their competitive, paranoid, hyper-loyal actions were. It was a way of creating paranoia in other employees by provoking them to think, “Whoa! Is he really more loyal than I am?” In a personal e-mail to his friends at the corporation, he stated, “I didn’t get that tattoo done as an act of loyalty or devotion to [the company]. . . . There is a real in-your-face element in what I’ve done. . . . The tattoo sort of symbolizes the question. ‘Who \*really\* gives a shit around here?’” In his interview, he explained that he did not hold hard feelings against the company but rather that the intended target of the tattoo was his coworkers, not the corporation itself. For IBM, his corporate tattoo represented “resistance” to corporate America.

### Subcultural Membership

Both Louisville Sluggers used their tattoos to express a rebellious identity and a “hard core” lifestyle that entailed involvement in the punk rock and independent music scene. Early in his interview, Louisville Slugger #1 explained that he considered most of his tattoos to be representations of various groups to which he belonged. He said, “I’ve definitely always had a group mentality, a really tribal like . . . I’m a member of this group.” One of the groups to which he belonged considered the Louisville Slugger corporate logo to be representative of their tribal identity. For them, the logo signified violent imagery, important because of the sometimes rebellious and violent activities in which the group engaged. He explained the “obvious reasons”



why the Louisville Slugger was a good symbol for the group. He said,

Number one, it's a baseball bat. . . . Number two, . . . you know, bludgeoning people with baseball bats is, definitely, you know, is definitely an image. . . . That's a pretty common thing. You know, beating somebody with a baseball bat. It's pretty common imagery. . . . And number three, it's a slugger. A slugger is a person who, you know, a boxer.

He further explained that the tattoo was more about "not being a victim" and a defensive imagery of violence rather than actually behaving violently. He continued, "I have a real tendency to portray myself as a lot more macho than I am." Both Louisville Slugger respondents indicated that they felt their tattoos were rebellious toward "mainstream" culture and were about being "hard core" within the local punk scene.

#### The Simulacrum

In contrast to Louisville Slugger and the other respondents in our sample, Crayola, Hershey Kiss, and *RealLife*'s logos were even further distant from the brand logos' intended meaning. For instance, *RealLife* did not adhere to a lifestyle represented by either logo; he was not an avid milk drinker, nor has he had a subscription to *Life* magazine. His personal identity may have been expressed and self-reflexively formed through his tattoos, but if it was, it was based upon meanings he attributed to the logos, not those intended by the corporation or the magazine.

*RealLife* was an Andy Warhol fan and said, "He definitely taught me the power of the symbol." *RealLife* explained that the key to understanding his tattoo was in the meaning of the words *real* and *life* when placed side by side. He said the two words together were "all encompassing" and "can mean just about anything." *RealLife* said he was "playing with the meaning" of signs and symbols and that although he believed that "reality is definitely a constantly shifting perspective," he got the tattoo to remind him to "keep it real." Similar to Ironman,

*RealLife* said he never thought about the logos being corporate. Instead, he said, "The symbol now has my meaning. It isn't related to the company."

Similarly, Crayola had a colorful tattoo of the Crayola crayons box because she liked the artistic aspect of the design. She stated that her tattoo was not about "loyalty" to Crayola but about having an "artistic tattoo." In a somewhat similar vein, Hershey Kiss said her tattoo meant something personal to her about being "kissable" and "sexy." For the respondents in this section, the brand logo had entered the simulacrum, where the original significance of the tattoo was altered and transformed into their own personal meanings. These tattoos are representations of the "real" brand logos but their meanings have been intentionally distorted. Baudrillard (1995) argues that the simulacrum is associated with the postmodern era where images are merely representations and "fakes" with no relation to any "real" meaning or reality. Thus, we theorize that the meanings of some corporate logo tattoos have entered the simulacrum. . . .

#### Discussion: Agents or Dupes?

Regarding corporate logo tattoos, our findings suggest that such body art is acquired primarily to express brand loyalty or to appropriate the logo into a simulated meaning. Beyond Adorno and Horkheimer's (1976) argument that the culture industry appropriates mass culture, re-polishes it, and sells it back to shoppers, our findings suggest that corporate marketers have skillfully constructed a reality that includes individual and group identity, community, and lifestyle. Athletes, for example, no longer think of their accomplishments in terms of mental focus and physical endurance; instead, they are "Ironmen," so steeped in the identity and lifestyle that they fail to think of their accomplishments in terms of crossing a finish line. Musicians and artists are "Mac guys" who "think different." Scholars have long recognized the insidious ways that corporations influence culture. Our research demonstrates the way this corporate construction of reality has seeped its way into



public consciousness and, indeed, for some, physical bodies, with identity, community, and lifestyle signified by corporate logos.

All of our respondents used corporate logos to convey meaning about themselves, their communities, or their lifestyles. Although most had reservations about why others get tattoos, all believed they were exercising personal autonomy and agency and that their tattoos represented something intrinsically real about themselves, their communities, and their lifestyles. On the whole, our brand-loyal respondents believed in what the corporations stood for and lived "the advertised life" (Vanderbilt 1997) as represented and marketed by corporations. As much as our brand-loyal respondents believed in the inherent superiority of the products, communities, and lifestyles associated with the logos they had inscribed on their own bodies, most subjects had negative feelings about the corporate logo tattoos of others whose brands differed from their own. Many said they "didn't understand" how corporations could create that much brand loyalty and that people who got them were "silly" and "ridiculous." Harley #2, for example, explained, "I don't see how anything else inspires the brand loyalty that a Harley does." Just as our respondents thought that others got logo tattoos because they had been duped into doing so, most could only understand why someone would get a tattoo of the brand(s) to which they were loyal. Thus, it appears that corporate logo tattoos signify membership in a consumer tribe in much the same way that being heavily tattooed communicates membership in a marginalized subculture. The difference is that the meanings behind logo tattoos were created by corporate marketers rather than representing something personal about the individual.

In contrast to the "advertised lives" of our brand-loyal respondents, those who attempted to appropriate the meaning of their logos were reacting to the commodification of everyday life by taking the signs and symbols presented by the culture industry and altering them to fit their own meanings.

We consider that these respondents were engaging in an exercise of personal autonomy, but we believe their exercise of power to be a form of pseudo-rebellion or pseudo-resistance. In essence, their rebellion is futile because they have chosen to resist the commodification of society by exercising power within the symbolic discourse created by the industry itself. To resist the commodification of culture, we believe one must step outside the discourse of consumer capitalism, and while the logos may be simulated versions of the "real" thing, they are still representative of consumer culture.

Significantly, most of our respondents did not see their acquisition of logo tattoos as part of this process, instead seeing themselves outside the process of commodification. Similarly, they believed that others' use of tattoos as expressions of rebellion was, for the most part futile, primarily because their moderate displays had become so popular. In other words, tattoos were a sign of rebellion and deviance before they became an accepted part of mainstream society. Since being commodified, however, their utility as an act of resistance had become limited. Still, our respondents believed that they could signify their rebellion by purchasing more and more tattoos. We see this as another part of the larger culture industry's creation of "rebel consumers," who believe they are mocking the dominant culture while at the same time conforming to emergent norms of self-expression promoted by the tattoo industry.

Our findings on corporate logo tattoos provide strong support for the argument that tattoos are symbolic of the commodification of the body and fail to provide support for the argument that they are effective symbols of resistance. Specifically, the majority of our respondents acquired their corporate logo tattoos as an act of brand loyalty, to signify an identity and identification with the lifestyle associated with the brand, and to symbolize membership in a group affiliated with it. It appears that most of our respondents had moved beyond living "the advertised life" (Vanderbilt 1997) as their bodies became what we



conceptualize as “human billboards” for corporations and brand name products.

These findings suggest that the commodification of culture vis-à-vis tattoos has moved beyond the mass marketing of flash body art. It appears that the culture industry has appropriated tattooing as means of “branding” consumers with logos that signify extreme brand loyalty. Those with corporate logo tattoos appear to have internalized the meanings created by corporations, believing that they really have the attributes suggested by the brand and that they live the lifestyle signified by the brand. In this way, corporate logo tattoos signify the commodification of lifestyle and identity, or what we term “pseudo-lifestyle” and “pseudo-identity.” Moreover, they serve as visible markers of group affiliation. Unlike tattoos among traditional societies, however, logo tattoos signify membership in consumer tribes (Maffesoli 1996) that have been socially constructed by corporations. Finally, these tattoos have resulted in the commodification of the body in that corporations have appropriated people to serve as “human billboards.” These billboards not only provide free advertising but also create a “next level” in brand loyalty, suggesting, for example, that those with logo tattoos have more “mystique,” “think more different,” or are more serious about the product and its lifestyle. The result is “pseudo-individualism,” resulting from the culture industry’s ideology, which promotes individualism, non-conformity, and self-expression through the use of name brands (Frank 1997, 232). Even as brand names are inscribed onto the body to affect an individual air, this pseudo-individuality serves to reinforce the ideology of the culture industry, just as Adorno and Horkheimer (1976) warned it would.

In a commodified society, tattoos are purchased to signify identity, group membership, coolness, and rebellion. The fact that signifiers of identities and group membership are for sale gives their purchasers a form of power in that they can choose whether or not to have such insignia inscribed onto their bodies. Yet while tattoo consumers may

be expressing their agency in society by purchasing what they like and want, the symbols they consume were created by the culture industry to support the discourse and institution of industrial capitalism. Thus, we believe the power exercised by tattoo consumers is pseudo-power, despite the fact that our respondents truly believed they were exerting real power. Furthermore, when our respondents attempted to appropriate the corporate-created meaning of their logo tattoos, they were, for the most part, unsuccessful, specifically because the insignia—absent a verbal explanation from its bearer—was likely to be interpreted in the discourse of corporate capitalism. As part of the simulacrum, then, symbols need not refer to their original referents, but absent a wide-spread, organized exercise of power, corporate logo tattoos are likely to be interpreted as free advertising, rather than resistance. Foucault (1978) appears to have been correct in asserting that “where there is power, there is resistance,” but in this case, it appears that resistance was futile because of the power of corporate capitalism to market tattoos as a form of rebellion and to define the meaning of body art, corporate logos, and the combination of the two. Rebellion against any discursive system, it appears, must come from outside. Individual efforts to appropriate or co-opt corporate symbols are, we believe, doomed to failure.

### Conclusion

Theoretically, our data suggest that tattoos have been commodified in mainstream society in that they are consumed as a commodity in what Atkinson (2003) calls the “supermarket era” of tattooing. Furthermore, the increasing popularity of corporate logo tattoos appears to reinforce the process of the commodification of society vis-à-vis lifestyle, identity, group membership, and the body. From a postmodern perspective, the commodification of society is a reaction to social fragmentation. Specifically, as individual identities develop and people are influenced by the commodification of everyday life, they learn that





they can purchase cultural products that will give them a certain appearance, lifestyle, and identity and provide them entrée into certain consumer tribes. Individuals who acquire corporate logo tattoos to express brand loyalty, adherence to a particular lifestyle, identity, or membership in a particular group may believe they are exercising power. It must be noted, however, that this power is created by the culture industry and supported by corporate capitalism. As such we believe that consumers of corporate logo tattoos use these body modifications as an expression of pseudo-power and pseudo-resistance because the identities, lifestyles, and groups they wish to signify are pseudo-products of an industry that has appropriated human bodies as uncompensated billboards. The extensive power of the culture industry means that even efforts to resist it by appropriating corporate meanings have been, and are likely to continue to be, futile.

#### Note

1. To protect the confidentiality of two subjects, we changed the names of their corporate logos because we were unable to document at least one other person having one like it. Those were a New Orleans bar we have renamed the Cat's Meow and a technology corporation for which we have substituted the IBM logo. The individual with the RealLife tattoo wished to forgo confidentiality, preferring us to use the real tattoo in our presentations and publications.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What do the authors mean by consuming culture and commodification of the body? How have corporations seeped their version of reality into public consciousness? Give some examples from your life.
2. What meanings did corporate logo tattoos have for people motivated by brand loyalty? Others co-opted a logo but rejected the meanings advertised by its corporation. (They, in other words, appropriated the tattoo.) What statements were they trying to make with their corporate tattoos?
3. Researchers have previously presented two different interpretations of the relationship between the body and culture. What are they? In the end, for which interpretation do Orend and Gagné find the most support? Are individuals with logo tattoos dupes or agents? What do the authors mean when they say that “consumers of corporate logo tattoos use these body modifications as an expression of pseudo-power and pseudo-resistance”? Why weren’t attempts to redefine the meanings underlying a logo more successful?
4. Consumer culture shapes bodies and our experiences of them. Consider the influence of pornography, now consumed widely by adults. While the Internet certainly diversifies pornographic content, some critics still claim pornography eroticizes sexual domination and submission in unhealthy and problematic ways. Others view pornographic consumption as liberating, especially for women, whose sexual restraint and expression are matters of political contestation. Who creates pornographic portrayals, who is the target audience, and who profits from them? How do these widely consumed portrayals of sexuality influence partners’ sexual expectations for each other and themselves? Do they create greater sexual expression, sexual pressure, or something else? Listen to Lena Dunham, creator and star of HBO’s *Girls*, describe an awkward sexual experience she had with a partner who wanted to try something sexual he saw on a pornographic website. Jump to 20:20 in her interview on WHYY’s *Fresh Air* (<http://www.npr.org/2012/05/07/152183865/lena-dunham-addresses-criticism-aimed-at-girls>). Do you agree with Dunham’s interpretation of sexuality among young adults? Has pornography and consumer culture influenced young adults’ views and experiences of sex?



## Grappling with the Medicated Self: The Case of ADHD College Students

MEIKA LOE AND LEIGH CUTTINO

*The body is an instrument of control, both as subject and object. We discipline bodies through regimentation, surveillance, and manipulation. We plump up or down in places through diet, weight lifting, or surgical implants. We weigh ourselves and strive to meet particular measurement benchmarks. We hold our shoulders and feet in specific ways, and we ornament ourselves through styling. All of these practices treat the body as something to be monitored and shaped through concerted, repeated effort. That is, we take ourselves as an object upon which to act. This treatment of the physical produces what Michel Foucault (1977) termed "docile" bodies, ones that operate in the ways we want: with speed, grace, strength, suppleness, or agility.*

How we experience and discipline our bodies is profoundly shaped by the symbolism we attach to particular performances of the body and physical forms. One salient meaning in Western cultures, for example, links the capacity to master—one's physical urges, nature, deficiencies—with morality or value. Being able or unable to overcome these things says something to others and to ourselves about how worthy we are of respect. Thus, the experience of chronic pain is not simply physical in nature; it also has emotional and identity-related implications. In turn, we discipline bodies in order to reinvent ourselves and what we experience as inhabitants of our bodies. We manipulate bodies to meet the expectations of others, feel

sensations we learn to crave, transform ourselves into desired commodities, and become the types of people we want to be. Bodily symbolism and the creation of an embodied self, then, are social processes created through our ongoing interactions.

In her book, *The Body Project*, historian Joan J. Brumberg (1997) examines this concerted working on the body as a "body project." She argues that girls and women especially have been subjected to body projects. Brumberg shows, for example, how historically women and girls pursued external controls to mold the body through bras, girdles, and purse-sized calorie-counting booklets. More recently, however, they have tried to shape the body through internal controls: dieting, exercise, meditation.

Biomedical technologies in particular offer medicalized, consumer-based approaches to body projects. Breast augmentation, butt lifts, and injections allow women to sculpt idealized youthful, voluptuous bodies. And women aren't the only ones taking advantage of biomedical technologies. Hair transplants, hormone treatments, and "little blue pills" allow men to create attractive bodies and sustained sex drives. We can finally, it seems, control our bodies and be who we want to be—with the right doctor or prescription (and money, of course).

But as we see from the selection below about college students taking medications for ADHD, changing the body comes with complications, even when the

Reprinted from: Loe, Meika and Leigh Cuttino. 2008. "Grappling with the Medicated Self: The Case of Adhd College Students." *Symbolic Interaction* 31(3): 303–23.



treatment is thought to correct something disordered. Loe and Cuttino show how students at elite universities experienced a "paradox of medical control" in pursuit of their best academic selves: "in order to have control, they must allow themselves to be controlled." Taking psychostimulants, however, challenged students' feelings of authenticity and adequacy since they usually considered their unmedicated selves to be more natural and real. Students negotiated these competing demands of the self and the body by picking and choosing when to take their medicines, adjusting the dosage, adapting their academic expectations for themselves, or developing other ways of controlling their bodies. The student who did not experience conflict regarding authenticity took her medicine every day and fully normalized her medicated self.

This selection, then, demonstrates how we surveil and discipline our bodies. It also shows how our bodies are connected to ourselves. Our sensations and feelings depend on who we think we are and should be. When the self one wants to be is challenged by one's embodied experiences, one often tries to fashion new bodies—through dress, meditation, pharmaceuticals—to become that person. Doing so brings new challenges which actors reconcile using the other interpretive sociological psychological tools available to them.

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Over the past two decades an astonishing number of children, adolescents, and, more recently, adults in the United States have been diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and prescribed treatment in the form of medications such as Ritalin and Adderall. Nearly eight million children have been diagnosed with ADHD, and the demographics cut across traditional race and class lines (CDC 2004). The picture is clearly gendered: almost 10 percent of

ten-year-old boys in the United States take stimulants for ADHD, while only about 5 percent of ten-year-old girls do (CDC 2004; Nissen 2006). And the phenomenon remains uniquely American; the United States consumes between 80 and 90 percent of the Ritalin available in the world (DeGrandpre 1999).

During the twentieth century what we now call ADHD has had a host of labels, many of which emerged in the 1960s in the context of behavioral research (Conrad and Potter 2000; Rafalovich 2004). Medical sociologists have pointed to overlapping economic, social, and political forces that have constituted ADHD as a diagnosis and an identity in the United States. Specifically, some have pointed to the efforts of advocacy groups, pharmaceutical companies, and popular media, and how, as a result of these efforts, ADHD now addresses a wider range of troubles, exemplifying contemporary "diagnostic expansion" (Conrad and Potter 2000; Rafalovich 2004). However, historical and demographic trends and macro-structural analyses offer little information about the lived experiences of individuals who have ADHD, and what their diagnosis and medical treatment may mean to them.

The present analysis is focused on the case of ADHD college students as they negotiate medicated selfhood.

Our informants have come of age in the pharmaceutical era, where prescription drugs are available, accessible, and advertised as commodities attached to lifestyles (Loe 2004). They are members of the so-called Ritalin generation (or "Rx generation"), that is, the largest U.S. cohort of children to receive prescription behavior modification treatment in the early 1990s (they were in kindergarten at that time) (DeGrandpre 1999). These students have grown up in what has been called a "rapid-fire culture," where a fast pace and constant stimulation have created an addiction to the technologies and social institutions that allow them to persist (DeGrandpre 1999: 18–22). There is the largest generation of parents actively seeking or accepting diagnosis and treatment of their children for



behavioral symptoms such as inattentiveness and/or hyperactivity.

Many children who took Ritalin are now enrolled in college, an environment in which they encounter new freedoms and responsibilities, as well as new demands and expectations. For them, stimulant medication can become central to their abilities to manage performance and avoid the perceived threat of failure and possible stigmatization. In this way, prescription medication can be an extension of their own concerted cultivation, a cultural strategy utilized to ensure academic success (Lareau 2003). At the same time, they must actively confront the fact that they are shaped by medicine (Karp 2006). While the use of medication may ease the pressures that accompany their pursuit of academic success, it prompts new questions and strategies in regard to identity and selfhood, particularly in light of a larger antimedication bias in society.

### Methods

Interviews were conducted to understand how college students construct and manage identity in the context of pharmaceutical use. Qualitative data allowed us to capture identity and meaning making in process. Our sixteen student informants attend a selective private liberal arts college in the Northeast; eight are male and eight are female. . . . [A]ll informants have been diagnosed with ADHD and prescribed treatment in the form of prescription stimulants at some point in their lives; fourteen have active prescriptions. . . .

Like the majority of college students currently diagnosed with ADHD (CDC 2004; Diller 1999), our informants self-identify as white and middle, upper middle, or upper class. . . . [T]hey have access to extensive educational resources. Many have had their own academic tutors, and more than half of them attended private secondary school for more than four years. With few exceptions, the rest attended public schools in wealthy communities.

In summary, our ADHD informants have been raised with a sense of great opportunity and

relatively few external limits. With a significant degree of access to medical and educational resources, these students risk shame if their bodies do not perform in accordance with the collegiate academic ethic. This is important to keep in mind, as it is central to our informants' approaches to strategic identity construction and management in the context of pharmaceutical use.

### ADHD and the Academic Ethic

. . . The complex of symptoms that make up ADHD has been designated a disorder and deemed treatable; as a result, a portion of the U.S. population has received medical diagnosis and treatment (Conrad and Schneider 1992; Diller 1999; Rafalovich 2004). In our contemporary health-care context, treatment for ADHD via psychostimulants is common; psychotherapy is rare (Rafalovich 2004).

In most cases, diagnosis and treatment cannot be separated from an educational context. Students face great expectations to be committed to their studies through regular, methodical, and disciplined work, especially when attending a competitive liberal arts college. This set of behaviors and learning styles, otherwise known as the "academic ethic," is learned and achieved in the context of a research-driven university, where faculty model and set narrow standards (Rau and Durand 2000; Shils 1997). However, students rarely, if ever, entirely adhere to this ethic, as it is characterized by ideal behaviors (Rau and Durand 2000). At the same time, they are responsible for managing their behaviors in such a way that appears to achieve this ideal. Though it is not clear whether a normative academic ethic exists, it is clear that the notion of an academic ethic persists and that the tendency to conform to it reinforces its very existence (Rau and Durand 2000). Students who have been diagnosed with ADHD are perceived to be in a position that hinders them from achieving the academic ethic, and pharmaceutical treatment can be seen as integral to the student's ability to meet these expectations. As ADHD students enter colleges with prescriptions in hand, how do they actively



construct selfhood and manage performance in the context of academic ideals?

### Strategic Pharmaceutical Use and Construction of the Self

In interviews, students describe how they can teach or discipline their bodies to correct for aberration and perform academically through stimulant medication (and through perfecting study skills, auditory and visual learning styles, and work ethic). Because the body is the route through which identities are exposed and expressed, the project of the self is in many respects also a “body project,” an endless pursuit of an ideal (Giddens 1991: 102). The project of the self is about self-management and embodied control (Foucault 1977; Giddens 1991). As a result, what have been perceived as physiological barriers to learning have been met with an approach that could be dubbed “concerted medicalization,” akin to Laureau’s (2003) concept of “concerted cultivation,” a common middle-class parenting style focused on “developing” a child to cultivate talents and capture opportunities for advancement in highly organized ways. In this way, biomedicine can become a technology for “optimization”—a method for securing an optimal state of being, and future, for the college student (Rose 2007: 5). Psychostimulant medication can be viewed as yet another resource in a student’s “cultural tool kit” (Swidler 1986).

Giddens (1991: 14, 32) discusses late modern selfhood as a “reflexive project” where identity is routinely monitored, created, and sustained based on the social and psychological information that individuals gather from their surroundings. As an individual’s surroundings change, so too will the notion of self-identity. Thus, in a fast-paced, rapidly changing mediated culture, individuals may quickly shed one identity for another and engage in self-reflexive identity construction, remaking themselves in relation to available versions and generally pursuing the “best” version available (Berger 2003; Frost 2005; Giddens 1991).

... In a contemporary context of biomedicalization where medical technology is used to fix, normalize, and enhance the self, psychostimulants can be central to the optimization project and identity construction (Clarke et al. 2003; Rose 2007; Rothman and Rothman 2003).

However, while students may approach the academic ethic strategically, with biomedical tools for enhancement, many remain conflicted when it comes to identity and self. The most common metanarrative that emerged in our student interviews involved concern about the loss of a “natural” self in the context of pharmaceutical use. In this way, the process of identity maintenance and verification can be interrupted or “broken” in the context of pharmaceutical use, resulting in stress (Burke 1991).

If an individual’s goal is always “authenticity,” the phenomenological emotional experience of feeling true to oneself (Taylor 1992; Vannini 2006), then medicine can create a sense of inner conflict as the gap widens between perceived “authentic” and “ideal” identities. ...

### Understanding Medicated Identity in the Collegiate Setting

In this section ADHD students situate their use of prescription stimulants in the context of an academic ethic. In general, many express some awareness of the interplay between body and society; while they believe that they are biologically different from others, they also realize that their environment plays a crucial role in the construction of self. The following two quotes are from students who are perhaps most skeptical of the biological aspect of ADHD. Both individuals imply that diagnoses and subsequent treatment may emerge from an inability to meet the demands of social environments. The first quote is from Matt, a senior diagnosed in college, an environment that he implies creates disordered bodies:

The thing with having ADHD ... I don’t really believe in it that much, even. I think Adderall helps,



but I think it helps everyone. . . . I don't know if ADHD is one of those things that you have [biologically] so that you *need* to take medicine. I didn't need it before . . . and now that I'm taking it I'm just as with it . . . the situation just changed. Maybe people are situationally ADD [attention-deficit disorder].

Kristin, a junior diagnosed and prescribed stimulants the summer before she went to college, explains her diagnosis as a result of social learning and environment, an explanation that is similar to DeGrandpre's (1999) argument that ADHD is a result of a "rapid-fire culture" that has changed human consciousness:

KRISTIN: I knew I didn't have super severe ADD. . . . I thought I probably had . . . some level of it. But, I don't know. I didn't really believe in it until I was diagnosed with it [laughs].

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by "believe in it," exactly?

KRISTIN: I mean, I just see [ADHD] as a product of our society. . . . I mean if you're in Bolivia, working day to day, you don't really have . . . you're living for the moment, you know. . . . I see it as something about stimulation. You know, television, video games, all this. . . . it's what keeps you interested, what keeps you going to the next thing and matches your attention. And so if you don't have those things . . . that level of stimulation isn't needed to get to the next point.

Interestingly, both Matt and Kristin state that they didn't "believe" in ADHD prior to being diagnosed, seeing it as a social construct in the context of changing social expectations. After being diagnosed, however, each is forced to make a connection between social environment and individual bodies. If their bodies are deficient or dysfunctional, social environments are to blame. Matt and Kristin also blame themselves for not being able to keep up with social expectations. However, while they may see ADHD as a product of social expectations,

they may not go far enough in analyzing how they themselves interact with and contribute to these environments through their pharmaceutical use.

In every interview, informants note the challenges of the college environment. As Kadison and DiGeronimo (2004: 12) note, "When kids go off to college, society expects that their identity will shift from being dependent children to being responsible adults, but as students . . . find out, this expectation and the reality of the experience often clash." When individuals enter new environments, they are often faced with new challenges and situations that they may not be equipped to overcome. Identity may feel threatened, in that a once well-defined and capable self is suddenly questioned by the perceived threat of failure or the inability to perform as that self was once able to. The transition to college requires that students reevaluate selfhood in the context of new demands and expectations. Some have found that medication can smooth a difficult transition.

Diagnosed with learning disabilities at a young age, Mary was not officially diagnosed with ADHD until after her second semester of college. She discusses here how a demanding college academic ethic led to a reevaluation of her self-identity:

It was a combination of me no longer being at home with my parents over me. And I mean, I was pretty much trying to get by the same way I did in high school . . . not reading until tests . . . and I couldn't, I mean I was staying up for like three nights straight, two nights straight trying to read like, astronomy . . . the entire textbook for a test but I couldn't . . . and then I was failing the tests. So, basically it was. . . . I was pretty much the same but the school demanded that much more of me so I couldn't . . . get by.

Like Matt and Kristin, Mary's narrative suggests a stable sense of self in a changing context. She describes herself as "pretty much the same," but in an environment that holds her to a new level of expectation. Her new ADHD identity seems to emerge from a sense of inadequacy, a realization that she



was unable to handle the challenges that college presented. In the campus context, she is ADHD, and she self-medicates to meet academic expectations. But outside the classroom and the library, Mary retains her “authentic” self, a self that is not considered disordered.

Similarly, Ali, a junior diagnosed and first treated at age seven, describes her unmedicated self as “normal.” When she is medicated, she believes she can function at a higher level, a level that the college educational system seems to demand.

I mean, I still can function totally fine. I function totally normally in society without being on medication, it's not an issue with that. So like that's another interesting aspect of it. 'Cause it's like . . . well, I still could function, maybe not as well. . . . I'm not going to function at a level which, we, as a society . . . let's say like, higher education's sort of class, that kind of class, wants me to. I wonder, at what level . . . if so many people have ADD . . . at what level it is just because of the standards we hold over everyone and the expectations of the school system and the work world.

Ali knows that she is capable of performing, but she also realizes that she has chosen to partake in an academic environment that is often highly competitive. The challenge of handling a rigorous course load, creating a new work ethic, and establishing independence away from parental support is often unsettling to the student entering college. As in the following quote from Sean, medication is something he leans on in the absence of parent- or school-imposed structure.

Everything is so much more on us. That *we're* in control and *we* have to manage our time and *we* have to get it done, and there are no teachers there. You know, your professors tell you it's due on a specific date and that's about it. But yeah, you don't have [parents around]. Like my parents . . . were always there . . . to help me along. But now, it's all on us, or on me. . . . I've sort of realized how helpful the treatment can be. And at least for me, how necessary it is to get things done.

In this section, Sean, Ali, Matt, Kristin, and Mary suggest that pharmaceuticals make it easier to manage new (sometimes unrealistic) demands and expectations placed on the college student, and thus diagnosis and treatment are rationalized in this context of perceived academic necessity. Therefore, for the ADHD student, prescription medication serves as a tool to discipline behavior and enhance a sense of self-control (Loe et al. 2006). Perceived self-control is central to students' belief in the possibility of achievement; the greater the sense of perceived self-control, the greater the belief in the possibility of achievement (Ross and Broh 2000: 273). However, this is not the end of the story for our informants. While they are actively making sense of their disordered bodies in the context of externalized and internalized college performance expectations, they also see their “need” for prescription medication as frustrating and problematic, revealing the paradox of medical self-control.

### Managing Identity and the Paradox of Medical Control

ADHD students seem to be caught in the paradox of medical control as they describe their own pharmaceutical use in the context of need, dependency, or lack of control. Below, Sean, Mary, and Kristin reveal how the process of medication is one of compromise, or “give and take.” For them to “fit” with what they see as the academic ethic, they are willing to at least temporarily allow a foreign substance to control their behaviors and discipline their bodies. In other words, in order to *have* control, they must allow themselves to *be* controlled. As a result, their words convey a level of ambivalence about their relationship with prescription medicine:

SEAN: I guess since I sort of . . . control it myself . . . that I only take it when I think I need to . . . I guess, I don't know. I like it I guess. I think I like it. I don't like the fact that I need it, but I like the fact that I have it.



MARY: It kind of sucks [needing] medication . . . to do well in school. But the fact that I know I can do it, on medication. . . I just feel like, it's kind of . . . give or take, almost. It's like, . . . fine, but now I'm . . . just as smart. So . . . take it with a grain of salt.

KRISTINE: There are pros and cons. Because like . . . certain things in terms of my school work . . . that are kind of . . . out of control enough that . . . without a sort of support system, without doctors helping me, I don't know how I'd . . . take that. I don't know if I would be able to . . . be in school.

Fear of drug dependency is only heightened for students caught up in college performance culture who see ADHD bodies as limiting success and future prospects. In an attempt to confront ambivalence, many of our informants have created approaches to constructing selfhood by attempting to maximize self-determination and minimize medical control. In these ways, ADHD students are managing what they perceive as fragmented identity: the division of the medicated and non-medicated self. These strategies allow students to believe they are protecting their "authentic" selves and minimizing the need for medicated identities. Students report using three strategies to manage ambivalence and drug dependency (and in turn, preserve a sense of one's "true self"): self-dosing, avoidance of academic risk, and going off the drugs.

The vast majority of students we spoke with manage pharmaceutical dependency by asserting control of their medication and related bodily regimes. Many times this requires taking the doctor and parent out of the equation and self-medicating in ways that protect their sense of coherent selfhood. To do this, students practice "reflexive identity maintenance," weighing the costs and benefits of their medicated and nonmedicated identities and approaching each strategically (Giddens 1991). In this way they can appropriate and reappropriate identity as they see fit. For some, this means segregating their work and social lives, self-medicating and acknowledging ADHD only "when necessary"

in the context of academic success, while purposefully not medicating or identifying as "deficient" in the context of social success, as Sean suggests above. Many see this approach as achieving success in both realms, protecting their authentic self and "personality" and leveraging this at times to achieve academic success.

For example, Kate makes a distinction between her academic and her social self, insisting that her Ritalin self (which is achieved only when necessary) feels "fake" in contrast to her authentic and familiar "social" self. In this way she temporarily trades on her sense of authenticity in order to feel good about herself academically.

I guess like I'm happier with who I am when I'm not on drugs like Ritalin. . . I feel better about myself like academically, like when I'm on it, but, not like, you know, socially. To me [the effect of Ritalin] is like—feeling physically drained and like almost fake 'cause it's not like who I am, you know?

. . . [M]ost student informants seem to construct their nonmedicated bodies as primary, normal, and essential (natural), despite having spent years (sometimes the majority of their lives) on medication. Anne, a junior diagnosed with ADHD her senior year of high school, has a prescription for a time-release and fast-acting daily Adderall pill. An ongoing relationship with medicine has resulted in a nonchalant integration of "medical talk" into her personal narrative (Mathieson and Stam 1995). It has also resulted in a decision to self-medicate based on what she perceives as periods and degrees of need.

ANNE: I don't take the short-acting every day. I take the time-release every morning. . . I eat breakfast and I take it, so around like . . . like eight? And then, if I have other work, I'll take the other one. . . I actually won't even take a whole one, sometimes . . . so when I don't have a lot of work, I'll take a half one.

INTERVIEWER: So do you take those everyday? . . .

ANNE: Not everyday. I don't take the time-release like, on the weekends when I don't have any



work to do. I only take it when I really have work to do, or if I have to sit through class. . . . Yeah, or like sometimes [laughs] when I have a really long movie, I'll take them, because I can't like concentrate on a movie for like that . . . long. But . . . I don't take it on a daily basis.

Students seem to enjoy the ability to pick and choose when they take their medication, as it means that they can assume their "medicated identity" only as needed. For Kristin, like Anne, self-medicating involves making decisions about dosage and drug variety, again effortlessly integrating "medical talk" into her self-narrative:

Initially [I took] the 20 mg time release, um, but eventually I switched off of that because . . . I didn't want to be on it for the whole day if I didn't need to be. . . . It helps me mainly for classes, more so than doing work . . . and so I'd wanna take it in the morning before classes, but by being on the time release, that kind of obliged me to be on it the whole day, even if I didn't want to be. And so I prefer to take the one in the morning and if I want, or if I need it, or if I have a lot of work in the afternoon or lab, then I'll take it. But if not, then I won't have to be on it.

Self-dosing allows students like Anne and Kristin to preserve a sense of authentic selfhood (Charmaz 1997) when not playing the role of the student. Below, Nathan explains why he chooses to take his prescription medication only in certain contexts. Being "himself" is preferable and synonymous with being off medication. However, Nathan is willing to shift identity for the purpose of work:

I feel like I'm kind of different . . . like I'm more subdued and . . . more concentrating on things, rather than being like, myself and being spontaneous. I feel like it's more like, focused energy. It's good for working but . . . I don't really feel like being on it all the time I guess.

While self-dosing minimizes the length of time that individuals are "controlled" by medication,

it also means that they are constantly shifting between their medicated and nonmedicated identities. The question follows: Why not stop treatment? If it causes identity conflict or distress, the answer seems simple enough. However, giving up treatment means scaling down aspirations, which can be perceived as a form of failure. Further, many informants have taken medication so long that they are equally as attached to their medicated self as they are to their "authentic" self. Doug, who was diagnosed at the age of seven, speaks to this point:

I don't like the idea . . . that the person I'm most like is the person who I am when I am taking medication . . . when there's chemicals that are running through my . . . that aren't naturally there. But I find more and more, that when I don't take it, I don't act as someone that I think that I am or who I'd like to be . . . that I feel like I can't do anything. So . . . I don't know what to do about that.

As his narrative implies, Doug has been on medication so long that he has become more comfortable with his medicated identity than with his nonmedicated one—so much so that he has actually begun to question and even dislike the latter. Rather than feel physiologically "disrupted" because of illness, Doug grapples with medical disruption and its effect on his body. Both he and Ali express these feelings of disruption through a form of medicated body ambivalence, where the medicated body is juxtaposed against the nonmedicated body against the backdrop of personal and academic success. Ali, who was also diagnosed at seven, expresses a similar form of medicated body ambivalence, stating that her sense of self is challenged and changed on medication. She tries to "deal with" the fact that her medicated "personality" is more normal than not.

I think it's messed up and twisted that I've been on study medications since first grade. I think it's . . . I can't say really a moral debate but, just a debate internally about how I feel about it because I know . . . there's no way I would be at [this school] without it. . . . And at the same time . . . [just thinking] how



much [taking a pill] can change your personality . . . who you are is . . . challenged. I mean I can deal with it. It's easy for me to rationalize it in the sense that I've taken it for so long I can just not think about it . . . which is what a lot of people do.

As a sense of identity conflict heightens, some students have chosen alternative, nonmedical routes to managing their performance and avoiding failure. One route is "cooling out," the process whereby individuals avoid the "hard no" and redefine their future on more "realistic" terms (Clark 1960: 574; see also Faunce 1984). This process ensures that individuals are able to remain successful, even if their aspirations have been scaled down (Clark 1960). In fact, Kathleen Nadeau's (1994) *Survival Guide for College Students with ADD or LD* offers many tips that suggest the avoidance of certain requirements may prove difficult for this type of student. For Mary, who has been diagnosed with both ADHD and learning disabilities, the cooling-out process is especially central:

I pretty much know my strengths and weaknesses. So I know I can't take a history course because I'm not at all oriented in history. I'm pretty good in math . . . I'm pretty math-oriented. And I love education courses and I love sociology courses and [I'm] taking classes I know I'll be fine in. . . . I'm not going to go and throw myself in a Poly Sci course when I know nothing about it. So, . . . I don't really push myself to take courses that I'm not going to do well in. I take courses that I'm interested in that I expect myself to do well in.

Mary's strategy is to orient her choices around that which she perceives she will be able to accomplish. By avoiding certain subjects, she is able ensure performance, guard against failure, and gain a sense of control in the context of her surrounding environment. With many students approaching college in this way, the cooling-out process is what *allows* "society to continue to encourage maximum effort without major disturbance from unfulfilled promises and expectations" (Clark 1960: 576).

In this context of strategic avoidance, the academic ethic is reinforced and rarely questioned. Although Mary has strategically avoided certain classes, it is clear that she still resorts to her prescription medication as a tool to meet demands and expectations. However, cooling out enables her to minimize the use of prescription medication, as she perceives her nonmedicated self as more capable of excelling in other areas.

Perhaps the easiest way to reconcile ambivalent identities is to stop using prescription medication altogether—a strategy that is particularly courageous and rare while students are still in college. Dylan and Homer both struggled with what they describe as stimulant drug dependency, largely because of self-dosing habits and perhaps unknowingly violating "normal dosage" amounts. Both have since sworn never to go back to these prescription drugs. Instead, each trained himself to reverse ADHD symptoms by using study skills or various relaxation techniques.

DYLAN: All Adderall does is make you think that you can do those eight things at once and really stretch yourself out; especially if you are as hyperactive as I am—Adderall is not the answer. The answer is meditation, the answer is yoga, the answer is smoking weed, the answer is having sports so like you're relaxed when you're not doing sports.

HOMER: I refuse to take the drug now—[so] I've had to come up with like techniques. Like I have to take breaks incessantly, if I don't then I will burn out. Like if I'm reading something, I have to, if I really wanna retain it, like I've gotta write, like, underline things—and then write next to it reminder words . . . and that's been real helpful.

For Dylan and Homer, training the ADHD body to fulfill the academic ethic doesn't require medication. In their case, medication made things worse. Medicine-free, they report feeling more in control of their bodies and "healthier than ever."



### Embracing Medicated Selfhood: A Contrary Case

Unlike the rest of the informants who choose to self-dose and take themselves off of medication during school vacations and in between periods of work, Lauren has chosen to follow her prescription every day of her life, including weekends and holidays. This way, there appears to be no conflict with what she perceives as her authentic self and her medicated self. Bury (1982) called this coping process “normalization,” or fully integrating illness into one’s sense of self. For Lauren, embracing illness goes with embracing treatment; for her medicated selfhood is a way to reconcile identity conflict:

It’s kind of offensive to me actually, when people ask me for it . . . and then people get mad if you won’t sell it to them . . . or give it to them. And I’m like, “This is my drug. I take this every day. . . . This isn’t like, “Oh I’m going to study and do work now. This is a like a part of . . .” it’s like if somebody wakes up in the morning and takes [medicine for] cholesterol everyday. I take my Adderall everyday. But . . . I feel like . . . it’s become such a study drug that . . . a lot of people just assume that you take it when you do work or whatever, but . . . I take it Saturdays, Sundays . . . if I just feel like sitting around. Just ‘cause . . . then you are regular. And then you function the same way every day.

Lauren implies a certain comfort in maintaining a “regular” and steady identity, instead of having to accommodate both a medicated and nonmedicated self. However, her path to this decision was neither simple nor painless. Lauren explained how her initial diagnosis in high school resulted from a trip to the psychiatrist that she took at the request of her parents. Even then, she refused to admit that she had the disorder and after about a month stopped taking medication. Below she discusses why she refused treatment:

The demands [of high school and first two years of college] weren’t as extensive and I could get by.

And so for a drug to make me a different person or whatever, I was like, “It’s not worth it.” I don’t want that.

When the strain of not being able to meet certain demands became too much for Lauren, she finally agreed to treatment. After years of debate, she found that the best way to resolve her identity struggle was to fully assume the new identity or, as she says, become “a different person.” Interestingly, Lauren was one of the only informants to discuss her ADHD as having an effect across her everyday activities and roles. However, like our other informants, Lauren expresses discomfort in the idea of taking medication for the rest of her life. . . .

### Discussion

Our analysis began with ADHD students viewing their own deficiencies within the context of the school environment. Against the backdrop of the collegiate academic ethic, students see medication as a tool for bodily correction and optimization. On medication these students believe they can manage college, the completion of which comes with great rewards. (The personal and social costs of not living up to the academic ethic could be extremely high for students with access to virtually unlimited financial, medical, and educational resources.) However, academic rewards aside, accepting the ADHD identity usually requires acknowledging deficiency or limitation and managing a mediated identity.

In the context of pharmaceutical use, ADHD students face a difficult situation in the pursuit of a coherent sense of self. To some, giving up their perceived “authentic” identity means being permanently controlled by medicine that blots out their own unique personalities. Giving up the “medicated” identity means losing the ability to manage performance and achievement. Willing to relinquish neither one nor the other, pharmaceutical ambivalence persists for ADHD college students. To manage this conflict, many students accept and rationalize situational medical control while





employing strategies designed to emphasize agency and preserve a sense of authentic selfhood. In this context, what we call strategic pharmaceutical use becomes a way to occupy a middle ground between medical optimization and authenticity. Not unlike workers who engage in emotion management on the job (Hochschild 1983), many ADHD college students attempt to manage the job of "student" with medication to achieve instrumental ends while aiming to protect their "true selves." Interestingly, while students justify strategic pharmaceutical use in the context of an academic ethic, they may not see how, by using prescription drugs to normalize, enhance, or fix themselves, they are contributing to the social expectations to which they are responding. . . .

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is the "academic ethic," and what role does it play in "concerted medicalization" for ADHD? How did the study participants make sense of having disordered bodies? To what did they attribute their condition?
2. Students often considered their unmedicated bodily states to be "normal" and natural, yet believed they needed medicine to perform academically because of their disorder. How did students negotiate this "paradox of medical control"? Why don't most students simply stop treatment if taking medicine causes internal conflict?
3. This study focuses on how people try to control their bodies in order to experience both the physical sensations and the senses of self they desire. What is the nature of the relationship between the body and the self here? What other ways do college students try to control their bodies? Workers? Patients? What happens when someone is unable to control their bodies in the ways they want? What happens to their sense of self? Why is authenticity so important to identity construction?



PART  
IV

## The Social Construction of Self

The experience of self is central to being human. People could not experience a meaningful reality unless they could symbolically convey meanings to themselves as well as to others. In order to do so, they must think of and act toward themselves as if they were someone else. We talk to, get angry at, encourage, and congratulate ourselves much like we do with one another. From the perspective of sociological psychology, this is the essence of the human self: to be both the subject and object of one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions. And the self that is the object of our thoughts, feelings, and actions is as much socially constructed as any other object of our experience. Our self becomes real to us as we act toward ourselves like others do. We interpret and define our thoughts, feelings, and actions in terms of shared symbols.

The selections in Part IV examine the social character of the self, the process of its acquisition, and the social influences that continually shape it. In addressing these themes, they offer the following insights:

- *Our sense of selfhood is responsive to and shaped by social processes. We learn who we are through our interactions with others.* It is through these interactions that we come to believe that we have distinct selves and that these selves





are meaningful. Thus, the self we develop is not simply an internal characteristic; instead, it reflects and emerges out of our social relationships.

As Charles Horton Cooley highlights in Selection 15, we develop a *looking-glass self* in early childhood. That is, we learn to see ourselves in terms of the “reflection” provided by others. This learning occurs as a result of our ability to take the standpoint of others and imagine how we appear in their eyes. Based on their actions and expressions, we gauge whether they see us in a favorable or unfavorable light. We then internalize the imagined appraisals of others and feel a sense of pride or shame. These feelings serve as a key component of our sense of self-esteem. Yet Cooley emphasized that our sense of selfhood also has elements which do not simply reflect the appraisals of others. We develop and express a feeling of selfhood through active appropriation—that is, through behaviors in which we lay claim to, or strive to possess, things as our own. This behavior is reflected in the assertive and sometimes aggressive acts of young children who exclaim “my,” “mine,” or “give that to me,” often in resistance to others. Thus, Cooley did not regard the self as something we passively acquire and sustain through our interactions with others. Instead, he saw it as images and feelings we actively appropriate based on how we think others perceive us.

- *Our ability to use language and symbols is crucial to our self-development. Because we can speak and converse with ourselves, we are both the subject and object of our own conduct.* George Herbert Mead, who built upon the ideas of Charles Horton Cooley, was the scholar who most insightfully revealed the social nature and origins of the self. Mead demonstrated the importance of the socialization process in shaping the contents and structure of the self. As Mead illustrates in Selection 16, the self is a social product, emerging through the interactions we have as children and developing in accord with our increasingly sophisticated abilities to internalize the perspectives of others and view the self as a social object. Through our childhood involvements in role-taking activities such as play and organized games, we acquire a self that has a structure—a set of internalized roles and perspectives—that reflects the structure of the communities to which we belong.
- *As we internalize the attitudes of others and become self-reflexive, we acquire the ability to adjust our actions to the expectations of others. This ability makes it possible for us to engage in social life effectively. It does not, however, make us act in ways that mindlessly conform to others' expectations.* We have the capacity to act innovatively, spontaneously, and unpredictably. This is rooted in the dialectical nature of our selves. As Mead points out, we possess selves





that include two elements: the “I,” or initiating subject, and the “me,” or self as social object. These two components of self are intimately connected. Their dialogue provides us with the basis for creating and regulating our conduct. We experience impulses to act and then imagine how others might respond. In turn, we consider alternative actions and eventually choose to engage in behavior that resolves the tension between their impulses and internalized social standards. In some cases, this behavior is conventional but in others it is creative or unexpected. Most important, it emerges out of the ongoing internal conversation between the “I” and the “me.”

- *In focusing on the self that individuals develop, sociological psychologists also highlight its ethnic, racial, and gendered dimensions. They recognize that in acquiring a self, people develop a conception of self as men or women and as members of particular ethnic or racial groups.* These identities originally develop in early childhood as we interact with significant others and learn to define and respond to ourselves in terms of gender or ethnic categories. We also learn the social meanings and implications of these categories through our interactions with a wider network of others, such as peers, teachers, and schoolmates. Guided by their responses, we internalize racial-ethnic and gender identities that significantly influence our self-images and interactions. But, as Selection 17 demonstrates, we are not passive receptacles who simply accept and internalize the ethnic classifications others attach to us. Instead, we actively manage and negotiate the meanings of those classifications in our ongoing actions, relationships, and self-presentations.
- *In addition to acquiring gender and racial-ethnic identities, we develop identities linked to particular groups, which are characterized by their own rules, roles, beliefs, and viewpoints.* These groups can have profound implications for the values you embrace and the self you enact. For instance, if you become a member of a violent, male-dominated gang, you are required to undergo a major change of identity, which you must validate by displaying your willingness to use a gun to deal with threats to the group or challenges to your toughness.
- *Despite the challenges of living in a postmodern society that places the self under siege, exposing it to rapid change and an array of diverse and often contradictory perspectives, most people sustain a stable and somewhat unified sense of self. What has changed above all in the postmodern world is the number and variety of opportunities we have for self-construction.* As Gubrium and Holstein emphasize in Selection 18, we are currently presented with myriad possibilities for talking and acting particular selves into being. There are





countless varieties of support groups, therapeutic clinics, recreational clubs, online communities, self-improvement programs, and corporate merchandisers who are eager to have us consume and construct “new and improved” selves. Moreover, the selves offered by these differing groups are promoted on television, the Internet, and social media sites as well as in newspapers, books, and other “discursive environments.” In response to these circumstances, it becomes increasingly challenging for us to feel like we have a stable, adequate, and firmly grounded self.

When reflecting upon the nature of the contemporary social life, post-modern theorists such as Kenneth Gergen ask: Is the cascade of increasingly diverse, conflicting, and electronically mediated social experiences saturating and dissolving the self? Or can we cling to the idea of a “real self” and effectively choose from the smorgasbord of possibilities for self-expression offered in urban industrial societies? In addressing these questions, sociological psychologists point out that most of us find ways to sustain a unifying but flexible sense of self in our everyday lives – and most of us do not give up on the idea that we have a stable, core self that persists over time. As Gubrium and Holstein point out, rather than abandoning the notion that we have a core self, we appear to have intensified our search for it, turning to a variety of institutions that promise to help us discover “who we really are.”





## The Self as Sentiment and Reflection

CHARLES HORTON COOLEY

Charles Horton Cooley was an economist by training who made important contributions to the development of sociological psychology. The influence of Adam Smith's theory of human sentiments is obvious in this selection, which was written around the turn of the twentieth century. In *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith maintains that individuals' sympathetic identification with one another's situation provides the moral foundation of human social life. For Cooley, the human self also rests on individuals' emotional responsiveness to one another. He argues that sentiment is the core of the human self and is central to its development. Accordingly, a sense of appropriation is the source of this self-feeling. The individual not only appropriates people and material objects by claiming them as "mine," but he or she also appropriates images of himself or herself reflected in others' treatment of him or her.

This is what is commonly known as Cooley's theory of "the looking-glass self." Cooley suggests that the individual can only reflect upon and form images of himself or herself through the imaginary adoption of someone else's perspective. The individual imagines how he or she must appear to someone, imagines how that person must be judging his or her appearance and behavior, and consequently feels either pride or shame. Such socially reflected images inform the individual of who and what she or he is, and the

consequent feelings of pride and shame provide the grounds for her or his sense of self-worth or esteem.

Cooley's young daughter, M., was an important source of inspiration for his theory of the looking-glass self. He closely observed and took meticulous notes on her behavior. Cooley was particularly taken by her use of first-person pronouns like "mine" and "my." As Cooley notes, unlike most other expressions, these pronouns mean something or someone quite different depending on who is speaking. M. could only have learned to use pronouns correctly by reflecting how others used them—by the imaginary adoption of other people's perspectives. Cooley was also amazed at how early in life M. was aware of her influence over others. She recognized the reflections of her own actions in how others responded to her. For us, as for M., others' responses are the looking glass in which we see reflected images of ourselves. It is from these socially reflected images that we construct a self and our feelings about it.

It is well to say at the outset that by the word "self" in this discussion is meant simply that which is designated in common speech by the pronouns of the first person singular, "I," "me," "my," "mine," and "myself." "Self" and "ego" are used by metaphysicians and moralists in many other senses, more or less remote from the "I" of daily speech and thought, and with these I wish to have as little

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to do as possible. What is here discussed is what psychologists call the empirical self, the self that can be apprehended or verified by ordinary observation. I qualify it by the word "social" not as implying the existence of a self that is not social—for I think that the "I" of common language always has more or less distinct reference to other people as well as the speaker—but because I wish to emphasize and dwell upon the social aspect of it.

The distinctive thing in the idea, for which the pronouns of the first person are names, is apparently a characteristic kind of feeling which may be called the my-feeling or sense of appropriation. Almost any sort of ideas may be associated with this feeling, and that alone, it would seem, is the determining factor in the matter. As Professor James says in his admirable discussion of the self, the words "me" and "self" designate "all the things which have the power to produce in a stream of consciousness excitement of a certain peculiar sort. . . ." The social self is simply any idea, or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes as its own. Self-feeling has its chief scope within the general life, not outside of it. . . .

That the "I" of common speech has a meaning which includes some sort of reference to other persons is involved in the very fact that the word and the ideas it stands for are phenomena of language and the communicative life. It is doubtful whether it is possible to use language at all without thinking more or less distinctly of someone else, and certainly the things to which we give names, and which have a large place in reflective thought, are almost always those which are impressed upon us by our contact with other people. Where there is no communication there can be no nomenclature and no developed thought. What we call "me," "mine," or "myself" is, then, not something separate from the general life, but the most interesting part of it, a part whose interest arises from the very fact that it is both general and individual. That is, we care for it just because it is that phase of the mind that

is living and striving in the common life, trying to impress itself upon the minds of others. "I" is a militant social tendency, working to hold and enlarge its place in the general current of tendencies. So far as it can, it waxes, as all life does. To think of it as apart from society is a palpable absurdity of which no one could be guilty who really *saw* it as a fact of life. . . .

If a thing has no relation to others of which one is conscious, he is unlikely to think of it at all, and if he does think of it, he cannot, it seems to me, regard it as emphatically *his*. The appropriative sense is always the shadow, as it were, of the common life, and when we have it, we have a sense of the latter in connection with it. Thus, if we think of a secluded part of the woods as "ours," it is because we think, also, that others do not go there. . . .

The reference to other persons involved in the sense of self may be distinct and particular, as when a boy is ashamed to have his mother catch him at something she has forbidden; or it may be vague and general, as when one is ashamed to do something which only his conscience, expressing his sense of social responsibility, detects and disapproves; but it is always there. There is no sense of "I," as in pride or shame, without its correlative sense of you, or he, or they. Even the miser gloating over his hidden gold can feel the "mine" only as he is aware of the world of men over whom he has secret power; and the case is very similar with all kinds of hidden treasure. Many painters, sculptors, and writers have loved to withhold their work from the world, fondling it in seclusion until they were quite done with it; but the delight in this, as in all secrets, depends upon a sense of the value of what is concealed.

In a very large and interesting class of cases, the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self—that is, any idea he appropriates—appears in a particular mind; and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other



mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking-glass self:

"Each to each a looking-glass  
Reflects the other that doth pass."

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.

A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. The comparison with a looking glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgment, which is quite essential. The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling. We are ashamed to seem evasive in the presence of a straightforward man, cowardly in the presence of a brave one, gross in the eyes of a refined one, and so on. We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind. A man will boast to one person of an action—say some sharp transaction in trade—which he would be ashamed to own to another. . . .

[This] view [of] "self" and the pronouns of the first person . . . was impressed on me by observing my child M. at the time when she was learning to use these pronouns. When she was two years and two weeks old, I was surprised to discover that she had a clear notion of the first and second persons when used possessively. When asked, "Where is your nose?" she would put her hand upon it and say "my." She also understood that when someone

else said "my" and touched an object, it meant something opposite to what was meant when she touched the same object and used the same word. Now, anyone who will exercise his imagination upon the question of how this matter must appear to a mind having no means of knowing anything about "I" and "my," except what it learns by hearing them used, will see that it should be very puzzling. Unlike other words, the personal pronouns have apparently no uniform meaning, but convey different and even opposite ideas when employed by different persons. It seems remarkable that children should master the problem before they arrive at the considerable power of abstract reasoning. How should a little girl of two, not particularly reflective, have discovered that "my" was not the sign of a definite object like other words, but meant something different with each person who used it? And, still more surprising, how should she have achieved the correct use of it with reference to herself which, it would seem, *could not be copied from anyone else*, simply because no one else used it to describe what belonged to her? The meaning of words is learned by associating them with other phenomena. But how is it possible to learn the meaning of one which, as used by others, is never associated with the same phenomenon as when properly used by one's self? Watching her use of the first person, I was at once struck with the fact that she employed it almost wholly in a possessive sense, and that, too, when in an aggressive, self-assertive mood. It was extremely common to see R. tugging at one end of a plaything and M. at the other, screaming, "My, my," "Me" was sometimes nearly equivalent to "my" and was also employed to call attention to herself when she wanted something done for her. Another common use of "my" was to demand something she did not have at all. Thus, if R. had something the like of which she wanted, say a cart, she would exclaim, "Where's *my* cart?"

It seemed to me that she might have learned the use of these pronouns as follows. The self-feeling had always been there. From the first week she



had wanted things and cried and fought for them. She had also become familiar by observation and opposition with similar appropriative activities on the part of R. Thus, she not only had the feeling herself, but by associating it with its visible expression had probably defined it, sympathized with it, resented it, in others. Grasping, tugging, and screaming would be associated with the feeling in her own case and would recall the feeling when observed in others. They would constitute a language, precedent to the use of first-person pronouns, to express the self-idea. All was ready, then, for the word to name this experience. She now observed that R., when contentiously appropriating something, frequently exclaimed, "my," "mine," "give it to *me*," "I want it," and the like. Nothing more natural, then, than that she should adopt these words as names for a frequent and vivid experience with which she was already familiar in her own case and had learned to attribute to others. Accordingly, it appeared to me, as I recorded in my notes at the time, that "'my' and 'mine' are simply names for concrete images of appropriateness," embracing both the appropriative feeling and its manifestation. If this is true, the child does not at first work out the I-and-you idea in an abstract form. The first-person pronoun is a sign of a concrete thing, after all, but that thing is not primarily the child's body, or his muscular sensations as such, but the phenomenon of aggressive appropriation, practiced by himself, witnessed in others, and incited and interpreted by a hereditary instinct. This seems to get over the difficulty mentioned above, namely, the seeming lack of a common content between the meaning of "my" when used by another and when used by one's self. This common content is found in the appropriative feeling and the visible and audible signs of that feeling. An element of difference and strife comes in, of course, in the opposite actions or purposes which the "my" of another and one's own "my" are likely to stand for. When another person says "mine" regarding something which I claim, I sympathize with him enough to understand what he

means, but it is a hostile sympathy, overpowered by another and more vivid "mine" connected with the idea of drawing the object my way.

In other words, the meaning of "I" and "mine" is learned in the same way that the meanings of hope, regret, chagrin, disgust, and thousands of other words of emotion and sentiment are learned: that is, by having the feeling, imputing it to others in connection with some kind of expression, and hearing the word along with it. As to its communication and growth, the self-idea is in no way peculiar that I see, but essentially like other ideas. In its more complex forms, such as are expressed by "I" in conversation and literature, it is a social sentiment, or type of sentiments, defined and developed by intercourse. . . .

I imagine, then, that as a rule the child associates "I" and "me" at first only with those ideas regarding which his appropriative feeling is aroused and defined by opposition. He appropriates his nose, eye, or foot in very much the same way as a plaything—by antithesis to other noses, eyes, and feet, which he cannot control. It is not uncommon to tease little children by proposing to take away one of these organs, and they behave precisely as if the "mine" threatened were a separable object— which it might be for all they know. And, as I have suggested, even in adult life, "I," "me," and "mine" are applied with a strong sense of their meaning only to things distinguished as peculiar to us by some sort of opposition or contrast. They always imply social life and relation to other persons. That which is most distinctively mine is very private, it is true, but it is that part of the private which I am cherishing in antithesis to the rest of the world, not the separate but the special. The aggressive self is essentially a militant phase of the mind, having for its apparent function the energizing of peculiar activities, and, although the militancy may not go on in an obvious, external manner, it always exists as a mental attitude. . . .

The process by which self-feeling of the looking-glass sort develops in children may be followed without much difficulty. Studying the



movements of others as closely as they do, they soon see a connection between their own acts and changes in those movements; that is, they perceive their own influence or power over persons. The child appropriates the visible actions of his parent or nurse, over which he finds he has some control, in quite the same way as he appropriates one of his own members or a plaything; and he will try to do things with this new possession, just as he will with his hand or his rattle. A girl six months old will attempt in the most evident and deliberate manner to attract attention to herself, to set going by her actions some of those movements of other persons that she has appropriated. She has tasted the joy of being a cause, of exerting social power, and wishes more of it. She will tug at her mother's skirts, wriggle, gurgle, stretch out her arms, etc., all the time watching for the hoped-for effect. . . .

The young performer soon learns to be different things to different people, showing that he begins to apprehend personality and to foresee its operation. If the mother or nurse is more tender than just, she will almost certainly be "worked" by systematic weeping. It is a matter of common observation that children often behave worse with their mother than with other and less sympathetic people. Of the new persons that a child sees, it is evident that some make a strong impression and awaken a desire to interest and please them, while others are indifferent or repugnant. Sometimes the reason can be perceived or guessed, sometimes not; but the fact of selective interest, admiration, and prestige is obvious before the end of the second year. By that time a child already cares much for the reflection of himself upon one personality and little for that upon another. Moreover, he soon claims intimate and tractable persons as *mine*, classes them among his other possessions, and maintains his ownership against all comers. M., at three years of age, vigorously resented R.'s claim upon their mother. The latter was "*my mamma*," whenever the point was raised.

Strong joy and grief depend upon the treatment this rudimentary social self receives. . . . At about

fifteen months old [M.] had become "a perfect little actress," seeming to live largely in imaginations of her effect upon other people. She constantly and obviously laid traps for attention, and looked abashed or wept at any signs of disapproval or indifference. At times it would seem as if she could not get over these repulses, but would cry long in a grieved way, refusing to be comforted. If she hit upon any little trick that made people laugh, she would be sure to repeat it, laughing loudly and affectedly in imitation. She had quite a repertory of these small performances, which she would display to a sympathetic audience, or even try upon strangers. I have seen her at sixteen months, when R. refused to give her the scissors, sit down and make-believe cry, putting up her underlip and sniffling, meanwhile looking up now and then to see what effect she was producing. . . .

Progress from this point is chiefly in the way of a greater definiteness, fullness, and inwardness in the imagination of the other's state of mind. A little child thinks of and tries to elicit certain visible or audible phenomena, and does not go beyond them; but what a grown-up person desires to produce in others is an internal, invisible condition which his own richer experience enables him to imagine, and of which expression is only the sign. Even adults, however, make no separation between what other people think and the visible expression of that thought. They imagine the whole thing at once, and their idea differs from that of a child chiefly in the comparative richness and complexity of the elements that accompany and interpret the visible or audible sign. There is also a progress from the naive to the subtle in socially self-assertive action. A child obviously and simply, at first, does things for effect. Later there is an endeavor to suppress the appearance of doing so; affection, indifference, contempt, etc., are simulated to hide the real wish to affect the self-image. . . .

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is the social self? Is there a self that exists irrespective of its relationships to others? Explain the looking-glass metaphor. How does the looking-glass translate into an idea of the self? How does it also translate into feelings about the self?
2. How is "my" unique from other pronouns, and why was Cooley so surprised by his toddler's correct use of it? By 16 months, his child played in order to get attention from adults. What relationship between the self and others does her play reflect?
3. A variety of social inputs shape how we imagine others perceive us. Perhaps when you were growing up, other kids gave you a nickname that attested to your athletic or musical ability, or you struggled to distance yourself from the poor academic reputation of an older sibling. Think back to your own childhood. What perceptions of yourself dominated your imagination and energy? Which did you distance yourself from and which did you embrace? How? What social conditions distinguish the two? Who most centrally influenced your self-perceptions and how? Did you become increasingly connected to that identity? Why or why not?





## The Self as Social Structure

GEORGE HERBERT MEAD

*George Herbert Mead is probably the most important figure in the development of sociological psychology. His characterizations of the self and its development are central to distinctively sociological understandings of the human condition. This selection is taken from *Mind, Self, and Society*, which is Mead's best-known work, even though he did not actually write it. It was reconstructed from the class notes of students who took a course of that same title from Mead at the University of Chicago in the 1920s. Mead makes a number of important points about the human self in this selection: the self is separate from the body, it arises in social experience, but it is more than a mere product of socially reflected self-images.*

*According to Mead, language is crucial to the development of the self. When we speak, we hear ourselves and respond to what we are saying in similar ways, as do those whom we are addressing. In speaking, we are both the subject and an object of our own action. Moreover, because what we say means more or less the same to us as to those being addressed, we can assume their role and anticipate their likely reaction to what we are saying. Mead observes that once children start to acquire language, they literally begin to take on the roles of others in play. They play at being a mother, father, or superhero. In so doing, the child addresses himself or herself in the role of those whom Mead calls significant others and responds accordingly. At this stage, the child*

*develops separate selves that answer to each role he or she plays. That is why, Mead argues, a multiple personality is, in a certain sense, normal. It is when the child starts playing games that he or she begins to tie these multiple selves together into a unified whole.*

*Games involve the rule-governed coordination of a variety of distinct roles. In order to successfully play a game, the child must simultaneously assume the roles of all the other players. For example, in Mead's favorite example of baseball, a first baseman cannot successfully complete a double play unless she or he takes the role and anticipates the reactions of both the shortstop and the second baseman to a ground ball hit in their direction. By simultaneously assuming such interrelated roles, the individual adopts the perspective of an organized community or generalized other toward himself or herself. Such a generalized perspective provides the individual with a unified view of self. As Mead notes, this implies that the structure of the self will reflect the structure of the various groups of which the individual is a member.*

*However, in Mead's view, the self consists of more than the "me" that is the object of others' actions. The self is both subject and object. The subject or "I" responds to the object or "me," sometimes questioning and challenging it. The self is not a thing but a process—a continuous interchange between subject and object, "I" and "me."*

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*Mead provides a profoundly social, although not socially deterministic, view of the self. The self is profoundly social not only in the sense that it arises in social experience but also in the sense that it is a social process—a continuous inner conversation between an “I” and a “me.” Social experience may make that conversation possible, but it does not determine what will emerge from it. It can be as lively, creative, and unpredictable as the most entertaining conversation among individuals.*

The self has the characteristic that it is an object to itself, and that characteristic distinguishes it from other objects and from the body. It is perfectly true that the eye can see the foot, but it does not see the body as a whole. We cannot see our backs; we can feel certain portions of them, if we are agile, but we cannot get an experience of our whole body. There are, of course, experiences which are somewhat vague and difficult of location, but the bodily experiences are for us organized about a self. The foot and hand belong to the self. We can see our feet, especially if we look at them from the wrong end of an opera glass, as strange things which we have difficulty in recognizing as our own. The parts of the body are quite distinguishable from the self. We can lose parts of the body without any serious invasion of the self. The mere ability to experience different parts of the body is not different from the experience of a table. The table presents a different feel from what the hand does when one hand feels another, but it is an experience of something with which we come definitely into contact. The body does not experience itself as a whole, in the sense in which the self in some way enters into the experience of the self.

It is the characteristic of the self as an object to itself that I want to bring out. This characteristic is represented in the word “self,” which is a reflexive, and indicates that which can be both subject and object. This type of object is essentially different from other objects. . . .

The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social

experience. . . . The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoint of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only insofar as he first becomes an object to himself, just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved.

After a self has arisen, it in a certain sense provides for itself its social experiences, and so we can conceive of an absolutely solitary self. But it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience. When it has arisen, we can think of a person in solitary confinement for the rest of his life, but who still has himself as a companion, and is able to think and to converse with himself as he had communicated with others. . . . We are continually following up our own address to other persons by an understanding of what we are saying, and using that understanding in the direction of our continued speech. We are finding out what we are going to say, what we are going to do, by trolling the process itself. In the conversation of gestures, what we say calls out a certain response in another and that in turn changes our own action, so that we shift from what we started to do because of the reply the other makes. The conversation of gestures is the beginning of communication. The individual comes to carry on a conversation of gestures with himself. He says something, and that calls out a certain reply in himself which makes him change what he was going to say. One starts to say something, we will presume an unpleasant something, but when he starts to say it, he realizes it is cruel. The effect on himself of what he is saying checks him; there is here a conversation of gestures between the individual and himself. We mean by



significant speech that the action is one that affects the individual himself, and that the effect upon the individual himself is part of the intelligent carrying out of the conversation with others. Now we, so to speak, amputate that social phase and dispense with it for the time being, so that one is talking to one's self as one would talk to another person. . . .

We have discussed the social foundations of the self. . . . We may now explicitly raise the question as to the nature of the "I" which is aware of the social "me." . . . The "I" reacts to the self which arises through taking the attitudes of others. Through taking those attitudes, we have introduced the "me" and we react to it as an "I."

The "I" is the response of the individual to the attitude of the community as this appears in his own experience. His response to that organized attitude in turn changes it. . . . [T]his is a change which is not present in his own experience until after it takes place. The "I" appears in our experience in memory. It is only after we have acted that we know what we have done; it is only after we have spoken that we know what we have said. The adjustment to that organized world which is present in our own nature is one that represents the "me" and is constantly there. But if the response to it is a response which is of the nature of the conversation of gestures, if it creates a situation which is in some sense novel, if one puts up his side of the case, asserts himself over against others and insists that they take a different attitude toward himself, then there is something important occurring that is not previously present in experience. . . . Such a novel reply to the social situation . . . constitutes the "I" as over against the "me."

The problem now presents itself as to how, in detail, a self arises. We have to note something of the background of its genesis. . . . We have seen . . . that there are certain gestures that affect the organism as they affect other organisms and may, therefore, arouse in the organism responses of the same character as aroused in the other. Here, then, we have a situation in which the individual may at least arouse responses in himself and reply to these

responses, the condition being that the social stimuli have an effect on the individual which is like that which they have on the other. That, for example, is what is implied in language; otherwise, language as significant symbol would disappear, since the individual would not get the meaning of that which he says. . . . It is out of that sort of language that the mind of Helen Keller was built up. As she has recognized, it was not until she could get into communication with other persons through symbols which could arouse in herself the responses they arouse in other people that she could get what we term a mental content, or a self.

Another set of background factors in the genesis of the self is represented in the activities of play and the game.

We find [among] children . . . invisible, imaginary companions. . . . [Children] organize in this way the responses which they call out in other persons and call out also in themselves. Of course, this playing with an imaginary companion is only a peculiarly interesting phase of ordinary play. Play in this sense, especially the stage which precedes the organized games, is a play at something. A child plays at being a mother, at being a teacher, at being a policeman; that is, he is taking different roles, as we say. We have something that suggests this in what we call the play of animals: a cat will play with her kittens, and dogs play with each other. Two dogs playing with each other will attack and defend, in a process which if carried through would amount to an actual fight. There is a combination of responses which checks the depth of the bite. But we do not have in such a situation the dogs taking a definite role in the sense that a child deliberately takes the role of another. This tendency on the part of the children is what we are working with in the kindergarten where the roles which the children assume are made the basis for training. When a child does assume a role he has in himself the stimuli which call out that particular response or group of responses. He may, of course, run away when he is chased, as the dog does, or he may turn around and strike back just as the dog



does in his play. But that is not the same as playing at something. Children get together to "play Indian." This means that the child has a certain set of stimuli which call out in itself the responses that they would call out in others, and which answer to an Indian, in the play period the child utilizes his own responses to these stimuli which he makes use of in building a self. The response which he has a tendency to make to these stimuli organizes them. He plays that he is, for instance, offering himself something, and he buys it; he gives a letter to himself and takes it away; he addresses himself as a parent, as a teacher; he arrests himself as a policeman. He has a set of stimuli which call out in himself the sort of responses they call out in others. He takes this group of responses and organizes them into a certain whole. Such is the simplest form of being another to one's self. It involves a temporal situation. The child says something in one character and responds in another character, and then his responding in another character is a stimulus to himself in the first character, and so the conversation goes on. A certain organized structure arises in him and in his other which replies to it, and these carry on the conversation of gestures between themselves.

If we contrast play with the situation in an organized game, we note the essential difference that the child who plays in a game must be ready to take the attitude of everyone else involved in that game, and that these different roles must have a definite relationship to each other. Taking a very simple game such as hide-and-seek, everyone, with the exception of the one who is hiding, is a person who is hunting. A child does not require more than the person who is hunted and the one who is hunting. If a child is playing in the first sense he just goes on playing, but there is no basic organization gained. In that early stage he passes from one role to another just as a whim takes him. But in a game where a number of individuals are involved, then the child taking one role must be ready to take the role of everyone else. If he gets in a "ball nine," he must have the responses of each position involved

in his own position. He must know what everyone else is going to do in order to carry out his own play. He has to take all of these roles. They do not all have to be present in consciousness at the same time, but at some moments he has to have three or four individuals present in his own attitude, such as the one who is going to throw the ball, the one who is going to catch it, and so on. These responses must be, in some degree, present in his own make-up. In the game, then, there is a set of responses of such others so organized that the attitude of one calls out the appropriate attitudes of the other.

This organization is put in the form of the rules of the game. Children take a great interest in rules. They make rules on the spot in order to help themselves out of difficulties. Part of the enjoyment of the game is to get these rules. Now, the rules are the set of responses which a particular attitude calls out. You can demand a certain response in others if you take a certain attitude. These responses are all in yourself as well. There you get an organized set of such responses as that to which I have referred, which is something more elaborate than the roles found in play. Here there is just a set of responses that follow on each other indefinitely. At such a stage we speak of a child as not yet having a fully developed self. The child responds in a fairly intelligent fashion to the immediate stimuli that come to him, but they are not organized. He does not organize his life as we would like to have him do, namely, as a whole. There is just a set of responses of the type of play. The child reacts to a certain stimulus, and the reaction is in himself that is called out in others, but he is not a whole self. In his game he has to have an organization of these roles; otherwise, he cannot play the game. The game represents the passage in the life of the child from taking the role of others in play to the organized part that is essential to self-consciousness in the full sense of the term.

The fundamental difference between the game and play is that in the [former] the child must have the attitude of all the others involved in that game. The attitudes of the other players which the



participant assumes organize into a sort of unit, and it is that organization which controls the response of the individual. The illustration used was of a person playing baseball. Each one of his own acts is determined by his assumption of the action of the others who are playing the game. What he does is controlled by his being everyone else on that team, at least insofar as those attitudes affect his own particular response. We get then an "other" which is an organization of the attitudes of those involved in the same process.

A multiple personality is in a certain sense normal. . . . There is usually an organization of the whole self with reference to the community to which we belong, and the situation in which we find ourselves. What the society is, whether we are living with people of the present, people of our own imaginations, [or] people of the past, varies, of course, with different individuals. Normally, within the sort of community as a whole to which we belong, there is a unified self, but that may be broken up. To a person who is somewhat unstable and in whom there is a line of cleavage, certain activities become impossible, and that set of activities may separate and evolve into another self. Two separate "me's" and "I's," two different selves, result, and that is the condition under which there is a tendency to break up the personality. There is an account of a professor of education who disappeared, was lost to the community, and later turned up in a logging camp in the West. He freed himself of his occupation and turned to the woods where he felt, if you like, more at home. The pathological side of it was the forgetting, the leaving out of the rest of the self. This result involved getting rid of certain bodily memories which would identify the individual to himself. We often recognize the lines of cleavage that run through us. We would be glad to forget certain things, get rid of things the self is bound up with in past experiences. What we have here is a situation in which there can be different selves, and it is dependent upon the set of social reactions that is involved as to which self we are going to be.

The unity and structure of the complete self reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole; and each of the elementary selves of which it is composed reflects the unity and structure of one of the various aspects of that process in which the individual is implicated. In other words, the various elementary selves which constitute, or are organized into, a complete self are the various aspects of the structure of that complete self answering to the various aspects of the structure of the social process as a whole; the structure of the complete self is thus a reflection of the complete social process. The organization and unification of a social group is identical with the organization and unification of any one of the selves arising within the social process in which that group is engaged, or which it is carrying on.

The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called "the generalized other." The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community.

I have emphasized what I have called the structures upon which the self is constructed, the framework of the self, as it were. . . . We cannot be ourselves unless we are also members in whom there is a community of attitudes which control the attitudes of all. We cannot have rights unless we have common attitudes. That which we have acquired as self-conscious persons makes us such members of society and gives us selves. Selves can exist only in definite relationships to other selves. No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, because our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only insofar as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also. The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group; and the structure of his self expresses or reflects the general behaviour pattern of this social group to which he belongs; just as does the structure of the self of every other individual belonging to this social group.





### Reflective Questions

1. What does Mead mean when saying that the self is both subject and object? How does the self arise? How is play important in this process?
2. How are games different from play? What do we develop through games? In what sense is a "multiple personality" normal?
3. Read about the case of Anna, a severely neglected girl who grew up isolated from human contact until age 5, in Kingsley Davis's "Extreme Social Isolation of a Child" (1940, *The American Journal of Sociology* 554-65) and "Final Note on a Case of

Extreme Isolation" (1947, *The American Journal of Sociology* 52(5): 432-37). What happens to children who grow up in isolation or without regular interaction with others? What capabilities do they lack? Are those abilities recoverable? How?

4. Watch preschoolers play soccer at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vgov8MyuuA> or in person. Then watch middle schoolers play soccer at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxB1W228yOg> or another game. What is different about their play? Why don't preschoolers pass to each other? What notions of self do the middle schoolers have that the preschoolers don't have?





## The Ethnic Options and Identity Negotiations of Cambodian American Students

VICHET CHHUON AND CYNTHIA HUDLEY

Both Cooley and Mead propose that the individual acquires a self by taking the attitude of others toward himself or herself. What they imply, but do not explicitly address, is that the attitude of others toward the individual, the way they respond to her or him, is guided by social meanings. We define one another in terms of shared systems of social classification, which often include stereotypes. We attribute different identities and different characteristics to one another based on those classifications and respond to one another accordingly. As individuals come to respond to themselves like others do, they define themselves similarly and assume the identities and characteristics others attribute to them. For example, shortly after birth most newborns are identified as either female or male, and from that moment forward they are responded to as either a girl or a boy. As children come to understand gender classification, they also start to understand the gender-related meanings of names others call them and ways others treat them. Responding to themselves as others do, they adopt the gender identity others attribute to them as their own and take on the characteristics others attribute to them based on that identification. Gender identity thereby becomes an important dimension of the self. By the age of five, if not earlier, most children emphatically identify themselves as either a girl or a boy and insist

on dressing, playing with toys, and generally acting in ways that confirm that identity.

Similarly, in a racially and ethnically diverse and conscious society like our own, racial and ethnic identity is often an important dimension of the self. This selection examines how ethnic identities get internalized and negotiated in a southern California high school where 88 percent of the students are members of a racial or ethnic minority group. The authors, Vichet Chhuon and Cynthia Hudley, focus on the experience of Cambodian American students, who constitute about 20 percent of this school's population. In doing so, Chhuon and Hudley demonstrate how prevailing social attitudes, especially those associated with the "model minority stereotype," influence the school-related experiences of students of Cambodian descent. The model minority stereotype casts Asian Americans as smart (especially in math and science), as highly motivated, hardworking, economically and academically successful, and willing to "get ahead" in U.S. society without complaining about discrimination or seeking governmental assistance. As Chhuon and Hadley illustrate through their research, Cambodian American students do not necessarily embrace or accept these stereotypical definitions of Asian Americans, but they still have to grapple with its impact on the attitudes and actions of others.

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*In reacting to the model minority stereotype and its effects on their identity negotiations, Cambodian American students find themselves having two key options. The first option is to embrace a panethnic identity and define themselves as Asian American. By engaging in this form of identity work, they strive to use the model minority stereotype to their advantage, particularly by affirming an ethnic self that "looks good" in the eyes of teachers or peers. But this ethnic option is not equally available to all Cambodian American students. Those who are male, living in poor neighborhoods, and/or assigned to lower-status "academies" at their school find themselves excluded from the model minority stereotype. In turn, they are more likely to embrace the ethnic identity of Cambodian and reject the stigmatizing meanings associated with it, either by affirming the positive features of their Cambodian ethnicity or by disengaging from contexts where they feel devalued, such as their high school.*

*On a broader level, this selection illustrates how individuals do not passively acquire or negotiate ethnic identities. Instead, they actively explore their "ethnic options" and the meanings of ethnic classifications in their interactions with others. Their ethnic classifications often do not correspond to the classifications that prevail in the larger society, but they clearly recognize that such classifications are important. Unfortunately, as this study illustrates, members of ethnic groups—in this case, Cambodian Americans—learn that different ethnic and racial identities are not classified as having the same value. That is, they learn that some groups are viewed as superior to others. They also learn that these groups receive more favorable treatment than others because of prevailing stereotypes and the patterns of behavior they evoke.*

*As Chhuon and Hudley's study implies, racial and ethnic identification is arbitrary and somewhat malleable in nature. But this form of identification also has significant and enduring consequences; it is an important dimension of self and social interaction in our own and many other societies. We find ourselves located on what might be called racial and ethnic "islands of meaning" separated by a wide gulf from people on other islands. This separation is not*

*natural; it is a product of how others respond to us and how we negotiate the meanings of those responses.*

... The setting for this study was a high school in a large southern California school district [that] serves the largest Cambodian community in the United States. In contrast to other Asian American enclaves (e.g., Little Saigon in Orange County, California), this Cambodian enclave is an impoverished community,<sup>1</sup> with limitations on educational resources and college attendance rates that are typical of poor communities everywhere. Although white European American residents comprise approximately 50 percent of the population in this city, the inner-city community in which this study takes place is largely made up of Cambodian, African American, and Latino families (Chan 2004). Comprehensive High School (CHS)<sup>2</sup> is a racially and economically diverse school. During the 2006–07 school year, the reported student enrollment was approximately 4,700, and 60 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. The student body was 27 percent African American, 27 percent Asian (incl. Cambodian), 26 percent Latino, 12 percent white, 6 percent Filipino, and 2 percent Pacific Islander. In the school's surrounding neighborhood, streets are lined with Cambodian businesses including auto repair shops, jewelry stores, ethnic grocery stores, and restaurants.

CHS is the oldest high school in the district and is well known for its highly selective college preparation programs and its current school-within-schools system called "academies." These academies are curricular themed, small learning communities, and all students participate in one academy. Observations at the school and conversations with current and former students and counselors suggest that the boundaries between the different academies are clearly marked, and the academic hierarchy of these programs is well understood by students, teachers, and administrators. Students who are not admitted into the school's three most selective "magnet" academies (Intensive College Prep, Math-Science, World Commerce) must participate in one of the school's three less



prestigious and less selective academies (Humanities, Business, Communication). Staff and students often referred to the school's magnet academies as the "higher" academies, and many Asian American students participated in these three programs.

### Data Collection

Participant observation was carried out by the first author [Vichet Chhuon] for the majority of the 2007–08 academic year. Here, particular attention was paid to the ways students discussed and presented their ethnic and panethnic identities across different settings. . . . By the start of the second semester (late January), participant observation was carried out almost daily until the end of the school year.<sup>3</sup> . . . Observation of youth inside and outside of class was significant for gaining insight into how students presented and negotiated their ethnic identities. Observations during lunch, during passing periods, and after school emphasized students' "voice" and centered on how students presented themselves to peers and adults. . . .

Cambodian students ( $n=52$ ) drawn from across the school's various academic programs were [also] recruited to be interviewed for the study. . . . All of the student informants . . . were familiar with the researcher prior to the formal interview, having already met him either in a classroom or outside of class through friends. . . . The use of open-ended interviews enabled students to describe other aspects of their lives relevant to their ethnic identities and school experiences. Comments about discrimination, institutional inequities, and the complex meanings of ethnic labels suggested that the relationship between achievement and ethnic identities required a closer look. Audiotaped interviews were carried out over a six-month period in classrooms, offices, and the cafeteria. . . .

### The Lay of the Land: Cambodian Students at Comprehensive High School

Although Cambodians were a major student group at Comprehensive High, their presence on campus

was not reflected in the school and the district's data on student ethnic backgrounds. At the beginning of fieldwork, the researcher (Chhuon) asked for the number of Cambodian students enrolled at the school, but the administrator in charge of enrollment explained that the district classified Cambodians as "Asian." In this way, *Asian* represented an institutionally imposed label ascribed to many Asian-descent youth in this district despite the community's ethnic heterogeneity. Filipino students, interestingly, were not aggregated within this panethnic label in the district. This was likely because of the different sociohistorical positions that larger Asian American groups, such as Filipinos, occupy in U.S. society (particularly in California) as influenced by differences in immigration, population size, and political power. In contrast, the considerably fewer number of Cambodians in the United States often makes them a more statistically negligible community.<sup>4</sup> The researcher's assessment of Cambodian student enrollment at CHS relied on identifying those students whose home language is Khmer.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, some CHS staff hinted at the evolving demographic complexities experienced at the school. Early on, one administrator explained about CHS: "Actually, we're heavy in Cambodians; quite a few Cambodians here. Before at this school, when you talked about Asians, you think about Japanese and Chinese but it's not like that anymore." Early observations confirmed these comments. For instance, as Chhuon walked around the school's main quad area during lunch, he noticed many more young Southeast Asian faces than he had seen at any other high school he had visited, including nearby schools. Although he could not say for certain which students were ethnically Cambodian, CHS was located in a large Cambodian community and many Cambodian children attended the high school.

Throughout the school year, CHS staff and students routinely described Asian American students as "motivated," "serious," "hardworking," and "bright." In short, Asian background students were



seen as the smartest students and were expected to be in the most selective academies. The following quote from one teacher is indicative of this perception:

How do I think Asian American kids are seen at this school? (Pause) You know, I actually went to school not too far from here in the old days. Old days to you I'm sure (laughter). Anyways, I remember the Asians always kicking our butts in school, to be blunt. They always were more serious I guess than most of the kids. I had lots of Asian friends since I was in the [high academic track] at [names a local high school]. The truth is I don't think things have changed that, or too much. The Asians at this school are still the most serious students. I mean, it's no wonder really if you look at how they're raised, right? Just go look at the [magnet academies] classes. Maybe I'm not supposed say this, but you'll see what I'm talking about.

In addition to reminiscing about how Asian American students have been doing well since he was a local high schooler in the 1980s, this teacher, a white male in his forties, hinted at a belief that this success stems largely from Asian family values, [a belief that is] consistent with the model minority stereotype. Unfortunately, this stereotype of Asian Americans usually came at the expense of Cambodian students' ethnic identities. Also, Cambodian youth often spoke about the successful image of Asian American students in contrast to less positive views of Cambodian students. For example, Brenda, a Cambodian student in a magnet academy, described how Cambodians were perceived:

Like, the other Asian ethnicities, they're more advanced. We're used to living in the ghetto. Well, most of the Cambodians here in [city of research site], and most of us, like especially guys and stuff, they're like poor and into crime and stuff like that. But then it's different from other Asians,<sup>6</sup> like Koreans, they're more into school and more concentrated on it.

Whereas Asian students from other ethnic backgrounds were associated with high achievement

and academic motivation, Cambodians were assumed to be poor, low achieving, and involved in crime. And although Brenda brings up Koreans in particular, Cambodian students' reference to "other Asians" usually meant those students from East Asian backgrounds, including Chinese American, Japanese American, and Korean American peers. At CHS, many of these "other Asians" were enrolled in the elite magnet academies.

Although Cambodian students were well represented in the less selective Business, Humanities, and Communication academies, few were enrolled in the three magnet academies. Unlike Cambodian students in magnet classes whose peer groups often [included] white and other Asian-background students, Cambodian students from the "lower academies" tended to associate with other Cambodian students from similar academies. Gina, a Business academy student, said that in her classes "there are a lot of Cambodians, the same, difference you know? Well you know, the classes I have, I think there are way more African Americans and Cambodians in the classes. I think they are one of the two main ethnicities we have." In her interview, Sharon lamented the ethnic stratification she observed across CHS. When asked about her academy, she chose to comment about nonmagnet academies in general:

That's where they put all of the minorities [i.e., in nonmagnet academics]. Well, what I know of because like everyone that knows each other, everyone that hangs out with each other and CHS, like, is always like that . . . there's a majority of minorities and Asians, like Cambodians, and Blacks, and Hispanics. I barely see any Whites. That's not right.

. . . Cambodian students in these academies were in an especially precarious position because they often had to straddle a double perception of their racial and ethnic group by staff and peers in school. They were faced with ethnic identity decisions that shaped how they might be seen and treated as well as how they perceived themselves. Cambodian students' [images of their] social and



academic self [were] profoundly influenced by whether others viewed them through a stigmatized ethnic label such as Cambodian, or through a positive distortion represented by the model minority stereotype and associated with a panethnic label.

### Negotiating Ethnic and Panethnic Identities

Cambodian students at CHS were very aware of the varying levels of status that certain ethnic and panethnic identities held, both in school and in larger society, and they often negotiated their identities in response to their understanding of this hierarchy. Although Cambodian students viewed themselves as both Cambodian and Asian American, students attached different meanings and usages to these ethnic identity labels. Ethnic and panethnic identities were not just descriptive labels but represented differing expectations and behaviors. We discuss how Cambodian students negotiated their ethnic identities by focusing on two groups: those who identified panethnically [as Asian American] and those who embraced a Cambodian ethnic identity.

#### Panethnic Identifiers

Panethnic identifiers tended to be Cambodian students enrolled in magnet programs. Seventy-eight percent (18 of 23) of our magnet informants explicitly described a preference for panethnicity. Although these students identified as Cambodian, they were generally uncomfortable with solely a Cambodian ethnic identity. For example, Vanna explained:

Well, people always ask me, "What are you?" I say I'm Asian and they say, "No, but what are you?" I think it's funny to go on and on. I identify myself as being Asian just because it's easier to say that I'm part of this group. Because obviously I'm Asian. I look that way. But like within the Asian community they ask me, "What are you?" And I say I'm Chinese because I guess I think it like just looks better sometimes. I mean, I'm half anyways.

... Cambodian students like Vanna explained that they often emphasized their "other half" because of the negative images associated with the Cambodian ethnicity. More often, they preferred the panethnic label at school. A number of Cambodian students described themselves as "less ghetto" and did not want to be associated with Cambodian peers whom they perceived as trouble makers or those that did not care about school. In these cases, the students they were generally referring to were Cambodians enrolled in the "lower" academies.

Although students identified as ethnically Cambodian generally, Cambodian magnet students usually considered the Asian American panethnic label to be more salient at school. For example, Steven, a senior, said that he identified panethnically "to give a broader sense for probably someone who has not met me before. Like 'Oh yeah, I'm Asian.' [My friends] would say they're Asian too." A major reason cited for this identification was their participation in ethnically diverse peer groups formed through class. Different from nonmagnet classrooms, magnet academies were largely comprised of white American students and Asian American students of ethnic backgrounds other than Cambodian. Davy shared: "I have a Korean friend, a Vietnamese friend, and a Jewish friend, yeah, so most of them aren't [Cambodian] because there weren't that many Cambodian people. Like, actually the only one ... there's only one other Cambodian in [Intensive College Prep] that I know of." Observations of a number of magnet classes confirmed that few other Cambodians students were indeed enrolled. ...

Davy explained that even if more Cambodian students were in her classes, she still would participate in more ethnically diverse peer groups that did not include Cambodians. When asked about this preference, she responded: "A lot of Khmer kids hanging out in one place will usually get into trouble. Period." During the nutrition and lunch breaks, Davy typically hung out with white American students and one Korean American friend near where other magnet students congregated. Davy



explained that she was better off socially and academically by avoiding other Cambodian students at school. When asked about how she came to this decision, Davy . . . stated that she was mostly following advice from friends and older siblings that attended CHS. Her impression of Cambodian students was shaped largely by the circulating stereotypes in her school and community. For students like Davy, panethnicity in school was developed in response to the negative images associated with Cambodian youth.

Cambodian students also chose to embrace panethnicity in school because they perceived it as a path to a positive academic identity. For example, an Asian American label meant that teachers and students would view them as high achievers, rather than academic strugglers. Brenda, a magnet student, stated that "When I'm seen as Cambodian, for some reasons it lowers the view. That makes me feel proud to be seen as Asian. I want to be seen as Asian. I don't know why, but it's like when you're Asian you're good at math, and stuff like that." . . . Although these students did not deny their ethnic heritage when asked, they . . . understood the model minority stereotype of Asian American students and used it to their advantage.

Although the majority of panethnic identifiers were enrolled in magnet academies, some non-magnet Cambodian students also preferred a panethnic identity because of its perceived advantages. Different from magnet classes, nonmagnet courses enrolled many Cambodian students; however, students from other ethnic backgrounds (primarily Latino and African American) often perceived their Cambodian peers in model minority ways. Pich, a Humanities academy student, described the advantage in this way:

Like the other Asians, like the East Asians for example. Like, they all have degrees. Their parents all live in pretty kinds of houses, you know? They all have money and, I don't know, I feel like they want, sometimes I'd rather say just Asian than to say Cambodian because of that stereotype. Some

people wouldn't even know and some are like "Oh, okay" and then they have this assumption, and like yeah let people assume because I rather have them assume good things about me than bad things.

. . . [Pich's] quote suggested that she believed all East Asians were educated and well off. Likewise, this stereotype is alluded to in Yesenia's admission: "I think people think, like, Asian people are smart . . . I'm okay with it because it's good for me. . . . But it's not like I'm smarter than them . . . but then I know they think I'm smarter." Even though Yesenia knew that she was not brighter than her classmates, she perceived a benefit from being thought of as "smarter" by her non-Asian American peers. In class, this perception led to Cambodian students being asked by their peers to join them in group work and for help on assignments. This was especially true for nonmagnet Cambodian students in math class, a subject that Asian Americans were stereotypically expected to excel in. Generally however, the panethnic label was linked to a feeling of raised expectations and more positive academic identities for Cambodian students across all academies.

Some Cambodian students described a more complicated view of the consequences of ethnic and panethnic identities in school. A panethnic label, while positive, resulted both in positive and negative anxiety in school. Despite its advantages, some students were clearly troubled by the panethnic label because it was constructed at the expense of their ethnic Cambodian identity. Veasna, a sophomore in a magnet program, explained in his interview:

I think it's okay for that person to say "I'm saying that Asians are smart." I think it's really a compliment. It's not an insult. But it gets kind of annoying because of [other Asians'] superiority. It feels that way like when you're around them. They think that they're so smart. I don't know. I just, it just feels like they are not like respecting you equally. Where they don't even want you to be in their group because you're not very smart and



stuff. . . I think it's because I'm Cambodian, but I can't prove it. It sort of makes me feel kind of mad at myself; why am I not as good as them?

Although Veasna generally did not mind the assumption that all Asian Americans are smart, he often focused on perceived discrimination from other Asian American students, particularly in math. In math class however, Veasna seemed to get along well with all of his classmates. His rhetorical question "why am I not as good as them?" revealed a genuine insecurity despite Veasna's status as one of the best students in his class, as stated by his math teacher. When asked about this discrepancy in a later conversation, Veasna rationalized that much of his insecurities related to his "living around the corner" and his family's lack of a college tradition whereas he believed that other Asian American peers had college-educated parents and lived in wealthier communities. For Veasna and other Cambodian students, residency near CHS reflected their low socioeconomic status given the school's physical location in a poor urban community.

Nevertheless, for most Cambodian students the perception of the model minority as a characteristic of their race was viewed quite positively. Those who talked about panethnicity associated that identity with high academic achievement and intelligence. . . . Our findings suggest that Cambodian students, particularly those enrolled in the school's most academically prestigious schools-within-schools programs, strategically adopted a panethnic identity in school. . . . [They] welcomed the application of these stereotypes to themselves, although certainly at a cost.

#### Cambodian Identifiers

In contrast to panethnic identifiers, Cambodian students from less rigorous academic environments often held less negative attitudes toward their Cambodian identity. Cambodian students from nonmagnet academies often expressed a more explicit Cambodian identity and they understood

well the negative perceptions that some people held about [them]. Twenty-three (79%) of the 29 nonmagnet students interviewed were quite clear about their preference for a Cambodian identity. Many discussed pride in their ethnic background. For instance, when asked to explain how she viewed herself ethnically, Crystal, a student in the Humanities academy, stated: "Like what am I? I'm Cambodian. That's it. I guess I was brought up to be proud of who I am. So I've never really denied who I was. I've always said I was Khmer. I never felt that I should say I wasn't." A number of students similarly remarked that they "never really denied" their Cambodian identity. . . . Some Cambodian identifiers [were motivated] by a desire to defy negative stereotypes of Cambodians at school and in the community. For instance, Thomas asserted:

I know about the stuff people think about Cambodians around here. For example, I know that people look at me and don't think I'm gonna do anything. Probably partly cause I'm Khmer, but also since my sister didn't finish [high school]. I do look at it as like trying to prove haters wrong. Like, I want them to come here in June to see me [graduate], and my friends too. . . .

Cambodian students from nonmagnet academies often provided a more positive interpretation of what it meant to be Cambodian. Unlike many of their magnet peers, these students more often discussed positive images associated with being Cambodian, including good food and cultural dances. These attitudes were shaped by positive interaction with other Cambodian students at the school. For some youth, a Cambodian ethnic identity was viewed as advantageous in school. For example, Darius, a tenth-grade Communication academy student, explained:

In my opinion, this is a special school because you can actually speak Khmer with other Cambodians here. I know my Khmer isn't real good, but it's nice to joke around and other people don't know what you're saying. Even in English too. When I talk



about something my parents said last night, my Cambodian friends get it.

. . . Whereas some ethnic Cambodian identifiers maintained a sense of determination in their schooling, others responded to the negative views of their group in ways that undermined school success. During lunch, students tended to be segregated by their program affiliation. One magnet student, Jenny, explained, "Cambodian kids from the lower academies are way different. Like the Cambodian kids over there [pointing to a group in front of the library], they're ghetto, gang bangers, that's just what they do." Because of the presence of Cambodian gangs in the community, Cambodian boys at CHS were often stereotyped as "gang bangers," particularly if they dressed in a certain way, as reflected by this encounter with one counselor:

Before 5th period I ran into Mrs. Toder in the hallway who inquired into my research project. She is a counselor in [one of the nonmagnet academies]. She warmly welcomed me to the school and commended me for working toward my Ph.D. When I asked her about her experiences working with Cambodian students, she replied "the Cambodians here are really a mixed bag. Some of the brightest kids we have are Cambodian. . . . But you're going to see the boys here need a lot of support." When I asked what she meant specifically, Mrs. Toder mentioned gangs as "a real big thing getting in the way." As she walked away into her office she advised that "you can tell by them sagging their jeans!" [field note, December 14, 2007]

Most of the young men Chhuon interacted with, however, who fit this image, were not gang affiliated. Male students explained that their manner of dress (baggy pants, large T-shirts) was consistent with an urban youth culture that is glamorized in media outlets including MTV and Vibe Magazine. Thus, the ethnic identity issues for many Cambodian boys at CHS were further complicated by negative stereotypes about gang membership.

Again, although the majority of these students were not gang members, they often referred to themselves in negative terms consistent with the unfavorable stereotypes of Cambodians. For example, Chhuon [the first author] often engaged in lunchtime conversations with Cambodian students hanging out in front of the library. These students (the majority of whom were male and participated in the school's three nonmagnet academies) expressed pride in their Cambodian ethnicity and were critical of how teachers and other school personnel treated them. During one lunch period, a tenth-grade Humanities student named Arun discussed why his academy is often perceived as "ghetto." He explained: "If the people around us treat us that way [ghetto], then that's how we're going to be. Like, you know, those up on that stage [pointing to Cambodian magnet academy students across the quad], they get treated better by everybody here. That's why they do better. But they're White-washed." . . .

Standing nearby, James overheard the discussion and added that, "Security guards don't send those Asians to [detention] when they're late to school! We're like the bad Asians I guess." Hence, the "good Asians" were largely students from East Asian backgrounds as well as Cambodian students who associated primarily with East Asian and white American peers. For James and this group of Cambodian identifiers, being genuinely Cambodian meant associating with primarily other Cambodian peers and belonging to less selective academies.

Some ethnic Cambodian identifiers developed a clearer adversarial stance toward school. When asked about what it was like to be Cambodian at school, Danny explained:

It depends who you asking. I think most people are gonna tell you bad things. Like, some of it is true and some of it ain't. You know? But if you real Cambodian like me and Chris, and Sovan, the ones from lunch, then you're down. . . . If you ask the teachers they won't get it. . . . They just want to talk to the rich kids."



For Danny and the "real" Cambodians, being "down" meant that you understood what it was like to grow up poor and be outside of the CHS conception of a good student. Later on, Danny bragged about how he and his friends could manipulate their teachers by acting out in class:

"Sometimes like when we get bored we'll act stupid on purpose just to like see how far we can go. Like, just to see what the teacher is gonna do. Sometimes they don't care and ignore us. But like sometimes they kick us out. That's okay. We don't like that class anyways. We ain't missing nothing."

Many Cambodian students in this group belonged to an after school program in the community with which Chhuon was involved. One of these youth, Krazy (self-selected pseudonym), enthusiastically volunteered to be interviewed for this research. He said that it was important that "people know what's up with this place." The place Krazy ostensibly refers to is CHS and his eagerness to share his thoughts about identity and schooling reflected his experiences of invisibility as a Cambodian student. The following exchange reflected Krazy's sense of frustration and hopelessness:

CHHUON: How do you see yourself at [CHS]?

KRAZY: How do I see myself? Like race?

CHHUON: Yes.

KRAZY: I'm Khmer. You know? I'm not gonna deny it. For what? Know what I'm saying?

CHHUON: I think so. What do you think people think of Khmer kids at this school?

KRAZY: Ghetto. That's it really.

CHHUON: What do you think about that?

KRAZY: True probably. To be honest. I mean we ain't got money like the other Asians. No education really.

CHHUON: Do you think this is true for yourself?

KRAZY: I think so. I know you trying to help out and stuff, but it's too late I think. Like, I tried. I mean, like, what do you expect? Like if teachers don't care if we pass [their classes] then who's going to care? [Teacher's name]

don't care. [Another teacher's name] don't care. The truth is I don't give a shit about school no more. One time I tried to ask for help and [another teacher's name] didn't even want to help.

CHHUON: Why not?

KRAZY: Probably cause I'm failing already (laughter).

Students like Danny and Krazy dealt with their marginalization in school by misbehaving and giving up. Danny's low achievement was balanced by a sense of empowerment he felt from feeling that he could control a classroom by acting out. Unlike the first group of ethnic Cambodian identifiers, Danny, Krazy, and other boys like them, did not discuss any positive aspects of being Cambodian. Similar to other ethnic minority youth, their identity negotiation underscored ethnic pride in a manner that opposed school achievement (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). For these students, disengagement served to protect their sense of self-worth. . . .

## Discussion

. . . We argue that Cambodian students were actively involved in ethnic identity politics at their school. Marginalized Asian American students may actively adopt the model minority profile as a means for attaining a positive academic image in the classroom in pursuit of their larger academic goals. Cambodian students expressed considerable agency in their school experiences by adopting, emphasizing, and rejecting particular identities in differing contexts. Thus, the model minority label, although inherently hegemonic, was actively negotiated by Cambodian students. These youths negotiated their ethnic identity choices in ways that resist stigmatization while considering whether certain ethnic and panethnic categories were advantageous in particular settings. These findings resonate with other identity research where some second-generation immigrant youth of color believed that accepting their ethnic identity was an



invitation to be mocked and negatively labeled (Waters 1999; Zephir 2001). Consequently, some Cambodian students' embrace of panethnic identities and its associated model minority stereotype represented their acceptance of an overgeneralization that further marginalizes the variability in the experiences of Asian American youth. It seemed that for some Cambodian youth, their realization of their ethnic marginality pushed them to affirm the stereotype as a coping mechanism to deal with the conflicting images and identities available to their ethnic group.

Yet others accepted and embraced their ethnic Cambodian identity and pushed themselves to do well "to prove haters wrong," as one student put it, to show that not all members of their ethnic group fit into the negative stereotypes being circulated in their school and community. Unfortunately, not all Cambodian-identified students were able to use this as motivation to succeed. Some Cambodian identifiers, who tend to be male and whose interpretation of their Cambodian identities centered on being "ghetto" and underachieving in school, were recipients of severe discrimination from teachers and other institutional agents. This gender difference is similar to other studies that explain divergent experiences and outcomes between male and female students of color (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Lopez 2003; Noguera 2003). Like other research findings that show how hostile school practices targeting African American and Latino males can account for gender differences in achievement (Lopez 2003; Noguera 2003), our study suggests that being male and ethnically Cambodian can similarly problematize many boys in the eyes of adults and peers at CHS. Over time, the perceived hostility and discrimination can result in the development of students' adversarial stance toward school achievement. Our research, however, must take into account the model minority stereotype that remains part of the larger discourse of Asian American students (Ng et al. 2007), a group that Cambodian youth are often aggregated with, and the starkly different academic contexts that shape

urban student experiences. Perhaps female Cambodian students in our study were able to fit more neatly into individuals' conception of the model minority student, whereas their male peers who were not members of elite academic programs were more vulnerable to urban school practices that racially profiled and criminalized male youth of color in general (Lopez 2003; Noguera 2003). . . .

### Notes

1. Chan's (2004) study of Cambodians in the United States noted that most of the families in this community are renters and prior to 1996's welfare reform, a large number received federal welfare benefits for survival. Over time, this community became home to the largest Cambodian population in the United States.
2. All names and places are pseudonyms.
3. Given the size of this institution, Chhuon found he was able to blend in with most of the staff and was able to situate himself in the staff lounge and lunchroom without much notice. In contrast, students were initially confused by his presence there and often asked if he was a "new teacher" or a "teacher's aide." Over time, students adjusted to Chhuon's visits and often referred to him as the "guy writing the book." As his visits became more frequent, his presence at CHS became more routine and comfortable for students and staff.
4. Cambodians are still largely an immigrant population, and while many of the Cambodian students at CHS are U.S. born, their immigrant parents often speak Khmer at home. We counted a little over 900 (approximately 20 percent of the student population) names on this second language list.
5. There is a long history of Chinese settlement in modern-day Cambodia and many of the Cambodians that settled in the United States have Chinese ancestry (Chan 2004; Willmott 1967). The particular issue of ethnic distancing by emphasizing one's mixed ethnic heritage (Chinese Cambodian, Thai Chinese, Chinese Vietnamese) is examined elsewhere (see Chhuon 2009).
6. Our informants used the terms *Asian* and *Asian American* interchangeably to describe individuals of Asian descent. In this study, Asians typically



referred to Asian American peers. Informants also use “Khmer” and “Cambodian” interchangeably. We use students’ emic terms when appropriate to describe different ethnic groups at CHS.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is the “model minority stereotype”? How did it affect the self-images and identity negotiations of Cambodian American students at Comprehensive High School? How did they try to neutralize, challenge, or overcome this stereotype?
2. According to this reading, when and why are students of Cambodian descent more likely to accept a “panethnic” identification as Asian American? When and why are they more likely to reject this identification? What flexibility do Cambodian American youth have in selecting their ethnic identity? What resources did they use in negotiating this identity?
3. How did factors such as gender, social class, neighborhood, and friendship groups influence the identity negotiations of the Cambodian American students featured in this selection? How was their identity work influenced by popular culture (e.g., music and films) and media representations?
4. Why were ethnic identities so important to the students highlighted in this reading? What emotions and self-conceptions did they have invested in particular identities? What does the experience of Cambodian American students reveal about ethnic identity formation and negotiation?
5. Search the web for Harvard’s Implicit Bias Test or go to the website <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/takeatest.html> and take the Race, Asian, Native, Skin-tone, or Arab-Muslim Implicit Association Test. What did your test results show? Do you have an implicit racial bias? Were your test results what you expected or hoped for? Do they match your stated racial beliefs? Around 80% of Americans demonstrate an implicit racial bias. If racial biases become engrained even in the minds of people who espouse egalitarian racial beliefs, what is racism? How do our implicit biases affect our interactions with others? How do they affect our sense of self? How might we combat implicit racial biases?



## The Self in a World of Going Concerns

JABER F. GUBRIUM AND JAMES A. HOLSTEIN

Postmodern theorists argue that our experiences in contemporary society make the concept of the individual self unintelligible, erasing the very category of the self. This selection offers an alternative interpretation of our postmodern experience of selfhood. According to the authors, Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein, what distinguishes our postmodern social world from the modern world of the recent past is the multitude and range of opportunities for self-construction. In the past, people anchored their sense of self, or who they "really were," in familial, communal, and religious roles. Today, we are presented with myriad possibilities for talking and acting a particular self into being. There are countless varieties of psychotherapy that promise to help us "find ourselves." There has also been a proliferation of self-help and support groups. Recreational activities provide not only brief respites from the self-constraints of work life, but also the possibility of consuming identities. Even some employers offer "assistance" programs to employees that can enable them to repair and refashion their selves. Moreover, these varied opportunities for self-construction are promoted in a variety of media, including television, newspapers, websites, social media networks, and self-help books.

Yet, as Gubrium and Holstein suggest, when we take advantage of one of these opportunities, we do not experience it as self-construction but rather as self-discovery. For example, the members of 12-step

groups do not think they are talking an "alcoholic" or "codependent" self into being; instead, they believe they are discovering who and what they have always been. Despite the time and energy many of us devote to self-construction and reconstruction, we still believe that a core, "real" self lies within us. We may be confused about who and what we really are but that, we often believe, is because our true self has been buried by the overwhelming self-presentational demands of contemporary social life. Indeed, the growing opportunities for self-construction are, in part, a response to the widespread self-confusion in the postmodern world. However confused, Gubrium and Holstein argue, we have not given up on the notion that we have a solitary, core self. We have simply intensified our search for it.

Gubrium and Holstein also note that opportunities for self-construction are not equally distributed throughout society. For example, homeless individuals who are designated mentally ill must participate in particular programs for self-construction to obtain needed services and resources. In contrast, those in more privileged social structural positions can choose from a virtual smorgasbord of self-construction possibilities. That might explain why students of social life have offered contrasting assessments of postmodern selfhood. For those who can choose, the many opportunities for self-construction can be empowering. For those with few

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*if any choices, the self-constructing machinery of postmodern life may feel like an "iron cage" that prevents them from expressing their "real" self. It may not be that some interpretations of the postmodern condition are right and others wrong but rather that they address different sides of the same postmodern coin. In either case, they remind us that contemporary social life has created new ways of social being, which is to say, new ways of human being. Whether we recognize it or not, George Herbert Mead's insight is as relevant today as it when he first proposed it: the self is essentially a social structure that arises in social experience.*

Times are tough for the personal self. This stalwart social form was conceptualized as being the heart of social action. But now the self is increasingly beleaguered by claims that postmodern life decenters and trivializes its presence in experience. In this view, who we really are is constantly in question. What we can or should be swings in endless response to the demands of the moment. Postmodern life provides one identity option after another, implicating a dizzying array of possibilities for the self.

Perhaps this situation is the inevitable result of a fast-paced world. With daily living swirling about at unprecedented speed, some say that the postmodern self is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. It is fleeting and evanescent, a mere shadow of what the self once might have been. If it was commonly viewed as the central presence in experience, some observers of the postmodern scene now tell us that the self is arbitrarily "up for grabs" (Sica 1993: 17). . . .

Oddly enough, at the same time that such commentators portray the self as having come undone, actors in the world of everyday life seem to be unflinchingly committed to the belief that a singular, authentic self resides within. This self occupies an inner sanctum, insulated from the moral ravages of today's world. Social life may shape who we are, bestow glowing or blemished identities; it may confuse our public personas beyond recognition, but we still believe that a "true self" lies somewhere

inside, in some deeply privileged space. As besieged or hidden as the self might be, in the world of everyday life it is resolutely available as a beacon to guide us. It is taken for granted that in our most private recesses we do not need to divide ourselves between countless identities but rather feel it is still possible to get in touch, and be at one, with our true selves.

Culture plays a strong hand in this belief. We place great stock in the Western notion of an inner beacon, in a self that stands fundamentally apart from the social world. We harbor this inner self as a key ingredient in our everyday lives. Although it may be socially influenced, the self ultimately exists separately from—outside of—our social transactions. It is immersed in social affairs, to be sure, but its autonomous agency is also a leading theme of those affairs. Our cultural sensibilities articulate selves virtually owned by individuals, independent and distinct from the social marketplaces in which people acquire their identities. This *personal* self repeatedly surfaces in familiar phrases such as "the individual versus society," "the core, true self," and "who I really am" as opposed to who I appear to be.

What are we to make, then, of the cacophony of charges that the basic contours of this subjectivity have vanished into thin air? Has the personal self really been lost in the swirling experiences of postmodernity? Has the self been battered beyond recognition or into trivialized submission? Does it indeed not amount to much anymore?

Our view is that, even while some commentators have written the personal self's epitaph, it is still the leading experiential project of our era. There is overwhelming evidence, we believe, that if these indeed are trying times for the self, it is not because the personal self has disappeared from the social landscape but just the opposite. The personal self remains our primary subjectivity—a self we live by—but it is now produced in a proliferating and variegated panorama of sites of self-knowledge. These are domains whose participants regularly turn their attention to questions of who and what they are, or could be. From counseling



centers, therapy agencies of every stripe, and support groups to spiritual fellowships, Internet chat rooms, and television talk shows, personal selves have become big business, the stock-in-trade of a world of self-constituting institutions, which increasingly compete with each other for discerning and designating identities.

### The Siege of the Personal Self

To set a background for discussing these issues, we turn first to exemplary commentary on the siege of the personal self. . . . Perhaps the most poignant recent account is offered in Kenneth Gergen's *The Saturated Self* (1991). . . . Gergen argues that the self desperately needs to be sheltered from the identity storms that currently overwhelm it, saturating it with endless demands. According to Gergen, this frenetic and multidimensional postmodern world is so full of meanings and messages that it routinely floods the self, leaving it with no life of its own. Filled to overflowing, the self is diluted, with little sense of a true identity. This self breathes easily only when it escapes these relationships; it is most at home when it is separated from the maddening crowd. The self comes into its own by seeking haven in the quiet, private, sequestered hideaways of experience. Only there can it sustain a genuine sense of being who and what it is.

The first chapter of Gergen's book, *The Self Under Siege*, is revealing. From the start, it is apparent that it is the author himself who is overwhelmed, whose self is under fierce assault. Gergen is wrenched in all directions at once. He wants to control his affairs, but they spin out of control at every turn. He begins with a vivid account of how unraveled he feels. Recalling the scene that awaited him after a brief trip out of town, Gergen writes:

An urgent fax from Spain lay on the desk, asking about a paper I was months late in contributing to a conference in Barcelona. Before I could think about answering, the office hours I had postponed began. One of my favorite students arrived and began to quiz me about the ethnic biases in my

course syllabus. My secretary came in holding a sheaf of telephone messages, and some accumulated mail. . . . My conversations with my students were later interrupted by phone calls from a London publisher, a colleague in Connecticut on her way to Oslo for the weekend, and an old California friend wondering if we might meet during his summer travels to Holland. By the morning's end I was drained. The hours had been wholly consumed by the process of relating—face to face, electronically, and by letter. The relations were scattered across Europe and America, and scattered points in my personal past. And so keen was the competition for “relational time” that virtually none of the interchanges seemed effective in the ways I wished. (p. 1)

While most academics would envy the attention, Gergen senses that something is missing, something that might signal a feeling of being at one with oneself. He soon tells us what that is: “I turned my attention optimistically to the afternoon. Perhaps here I would find moments of *seclusion*, *restoration*, and *recentering*—three remedial features of a distinctly modern self” (p. 1; emphasis added). Gergen conveys the personal shape of the self he desires, one that apparently has lost its distinct moorings to the fast pace and diverse spaces of postmodern life. This self realizes its authenticity by escaping from the daily rat race. Undoubtedly, social experience nourishes such a self, but, ironically, it is most true to itself when it is apart from the social swirl. In seclusion, it can take stock of, and restore, itself. . . .

The working struggle between the inner self and . . . exterior forces is perceptively depicted in Arlie Russell Hochschild's (1983) account of the managed heart. Hochschild's book makes extensive use of similar metaphors to chronicle how the personal self manages to stave off an increasingly commodified sociability. Focusing on the commercialization of feeling in the airline industry, Hochschild introduces her reader to the “emotion work” of flight attendants. Their job is to keep customers happy. Hochschild describes how the attendants try to



safeguard their true selves in the face of nagging demands to selflessly, cheerfully serve customers.

Hochschild's presentation is not a lament over the state of the personal self, as Gergen's is. Rather, it is a story of resistance, a tale of how we protect our true selves from exploitation. Hochschild provides a strategy for combating the saturated and commercialized self, a way of preserving the authentic "me" we feel in our heart of hearts. Speaking of flight attendants, but hoping to strike a more general chord, Hochschild writes about how people might respond to a world in which feelings are bought and sold and emotion management is rife. In such a world, she explains, the true self is overrun by false selves that have been mobilized to ward off the growing demands of daily living. As outside interests inundate the self, it retreats inward, leaving only uncomfortable false personas directed toward others. We preserve our selves by seeking inner shelter from the social onslaught.

The "false self" is a necessary conspirator in this resistance. As Hochschild states, it is a "disbelieved, unclaimed self, a part of 'me' that is not 'really me,' yet necessary to protect the 'real self'" (1983:194).

The false self embodies our acceptance of early parental requirements that we act so as to please others, at the expense of our own needs and desires. This sociocentric, other-directed self comes to live a separate existence from the self we claim. In the extreme case, the false self may set itself up as the real self, which remains completely hidden. More commonly, the false self allows the real self a life of its own, which emerges when there is little danger of its being used by others. (p. 194)

Clearly, false selves perform an important, self-preserving function. They can be set up in service to others, protecting the authentic, core self. They serve as buffers between external demands and an internal core that maybe at odds with such demands. According to Hochschild, false selves maintain the true self while living civilly among others who make so many contrary demands on us.

With the true self hidden within, how do we know it continues to exist? Emotions, Hochschild explains, are the beacons of our authentic selves. Every emotion serves a "signal function," she argues (p. 29), noting that "it is from feelings that we learn the self-relevance of what we see, remember, or imagine" (p. 196). Emotions put us in touch with the personal "me," providing us with an inner perspective for interpreting and responding to experience. Social life becomes problematic, however, in that it often demands that we harness our feelings. This emotion management, Hochschild maintains, interferes with the signal function of feelings (p. 130), diluting or confusing a person's sense of self. As emotion management is commercialized, we must manipulate our feelings and, in the process, our selves, for purely instrumental ends. Consequently, our feelings are given over "more to the organization and less to the self" (p. 198). The upshot is "burnout" and "estrangement."

Flight attendants' emotion work provides a case in point. Hochschild explains that flight attendants are not only asked to smile as they serve their customers but are actually trained to feel and project a warmth and sincerity that convinces others that the smile is genuine. But as emotions are managed to meet these demands, the distinction between real and projected selves begins to blur. Hochschild questions this confusion.

What happens to the way a person relates to her feelings or her face? When worked-up warmth becomes an instrument of service work, what can a person learn about herself from her feelings? And when a worker abandons her work smile, what kind of tie remains between her smile and herself? (Pp. 89-90)

The answer is obvious: flight attendants become estranged from their selves, as, by implication, do the rest of us in our own ways become estranged from our selves.

Still, people know that social circumstances forever influence their behavior and feelings. We all are routinely asked to present images and



emotions that do not flow from what we take to be our inner, authentic selves. We convey impressions and emotions that are shaped by interpersonal relations, organizational policies, and the like. Our emotion work, Hochschild notes, shields our true selves and deep feelings as much as it manages social situations. It is a way of resisting social intrusions, a technique for counteracting the impact on our true selves.

But as we shelter the true self, we also isolate it. As Hochschild observes, "We make up an idea of our 'real self', an inner jewel that remains our unique possession no matter whose billboard we wear on our back or whose smile we paste on our face. We push the 'real self' further inside, making it more inaccessible" (p. 34). The more threatened it becomes, the further we push the true self inward. Ultimately, our defenses against the social siege can be the self's undoing. As we hide our personal self deep inside, we risk losing sight of who we are.

### Sources of the Self

These commentaries ring familiar. We routinely draw on a similar vocabulary to describe experience when the pace of life increases and demands on our time overwhelm us. Such talk concedes that the complex and varied circumstances of daily living are at odds with personal identity and integrity. Laments over such trying times cast social life as the personal self's ordeal, if not its antagonist.

But is social life truly so much at odds with the personal self? Must social interaction always involve a holding action against the apparently destructive infringements of the outside world? The central tenets of [sociological psychology] would tell us that this is shortsighted. Harkening back to George Herbert Mead (1934). . . reassures us that the self remains essentially a social structure, arising and flourishing, even coming undone, within social experience. Its sources and destiny lie in the very same social world that some critics view as perilously challenging it.

### The Social Self

From the start, the self unfolds in and through social life, never separate from it. If a personal self exists, it is not a distinct private entity so much as it is a concoction of traits, roles, standpoints, and behaviors that individuals articulate and present through social interaction. The self is not so much the cloistered core of our being as an important operating principle used to morally anchor thoughts and feelings about who and what we are. As we interact in everyday life, the personal self takes shape as the central narrative theme around which we convey identity. Indeed, commonplace experiences and everyday folk psychologies tell us that the personal self is the principal experiential agent of our culture. . . . It is the primary lived entity we comprehend ourselves as being as we go about everyday life.

Interaction and communication are key constituents. As we talk with ourselves or with others, we learn and inform each other about who and what we are. In a sense, we talk our selves into being. But not just anything goes. Social selves are not without design or restraint; they are not impromptu performances. What we say about ourselves and others is mediated by recognizable identities. We speak of ourselves in meaningful ways within the social contexts in which we communicate who we are. Selves do not just pop out of social interaction but are deftly assembled from recognizable identities in some place, at some time, for some purpose. . . .

### Going Concerns

As important as social situations are in mediating who and what we are, we must take care not to focus too narrowly on strictly situational influences on self-production. Mead and others. . . remind us that the environment for meaning-making is tremendously variegated and multifaceted. Perhaps most significantly, today's postmodern scene is widely and diversely populated by groups and organizations that are explicitly or incidentally implicated in self-production. This landscape of *[going]*



concerns provides much more than immediate, face-to-face contexts for designating who and what we are.

We borrow the term “going concerns” from Everett Hughes (1984) as a way of characterizing relatively stable, routinized, ongoing patterns of action and interaction. It is another way of referring to social institutions but underscores their actively discursive quality. For Hughes, going concerns could be as massive and formally structured as government bureaucracies or as modest and loosely organized as a group of friends who gather on Thursday nights to play bridge. Large or small, formal or informal, each represents an ongoing commitment to a particular moral order, a way of being who and what we are in relation to the immediate scheme of things. Hughes was careful not to reify going concerns; he did not view them as static social entities. Rather, he oriented to them as patterns of concerted activity. For Hughes, there was as much “going” in social institutions as there were “concerns.”

From the myriad formal organizations in which we work, study, pray, curse, play, and recover, to the countless informal associations and networks to which we otherwise attend, to our affiliations with racial, ethnic, and gendered groupings, we multiply engage in a panoply of going concerns most of our lives. The self is a product of this engagement. Many of these going concerns explicitly structure or reconfigure personal identity. All variety of human service agencies, for example, readily delve into the deepest enclaves of the self to ameliorate personal ills. Self-help organizations seem to crop up on every street corner, and self-help literature barks at us from the book spindles of most supermarkets and the shelves of every bookstore. “Psychobabble” in the public media, radio and television talk shows, and Internet chat rooms constantly prompts us to formulate (or reformulate) who and what we are. Whatever self we might have is thus increasingly *deprivatized*, constructed, and interpreted under the auspices of these decidedly *public* going concerns . . . (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

### Interpretive Practice

Because selves are interactionally presented and constructed in the context of going concerns, they are not conjured up willy-nilly out of thin air. As strategic as it might be, we do not make just any claim about who or what we are, cavalierly ignoring time and place. Self-construction is always accountable to the institutional preferences and the pertinent biographical particulars of one's life. . . . Broadly speaking, the self emanates from the interplay among institutional demands, restraints, and resources, on the one hand, and biographically informed, self-constituting social actions, on the other.

. . . [T]his interplay constitutes what we have called *interpretive practice*—the constellation of procedures, conditions, and resources through which reality . . . is apprehended, understood, organized, and represented . . . (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). It occupies a space now replete with going concerns, implicating both face-to-face processes of self-construction and the institutional conditioning of self-realization. . . . Employing [this] broad view of practice, it is possible to attend not only to the *discursive practices* of self-construction but also to the *discourses-in-practice* that supply the resources and interpretive possibilities for self-designation (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). These represent two reflexively related components of interpretive practice. . . .

### Discursive Environments

Since the mid-twentieth century, social life has come under the purview of countless going concerns whose *discursive environments* function increasingly to assemble, alter, and reformulate our lives and selves. By “discursive environments,” we mean interactional domains characterized by distinctive ways of interpreting and representing everyday realities. Schools, correctional facilities, clinics, family courts, support groups, recreational clubs, fitness centers, and self-improvement programs, among other institutions, promote particular ways of representing who and what we are,



furnishing discourses of subjectivity that are accountably put into discursive practice as individuals enter into their interpretive purview.

Such going concerns pose new challenges for the concept of a personal self. They are not especially hostile to the personal, nor do they necessarily saturate a vessel already filled to overflowing. Rather, today's discursive environments for self-construction provide complex and variegated institutional options for who we could be. While, taken together, these environments might be seen as an overwhelming surfeit of self-constructive challenges by some, they may also be viewed as a burgeoning supply of possibilities for who and what we might be.

#### **Institutional Selves in Postmodern Context**

Discursive environments set the "conditions of possibility" for subjectivity, as Foucault (1977) put it. They establish general parameters for producing recognizable and accountable constructions, including even the core self. With more going concerns than ever entering the self-construction business, we might characterize today's world as increasingly populated by *institutional selves* (Gubrium and Holstein forthcoming).

In some institutions, such as psychiatric hospitals and counseling centers, selves are officially constructed in terms of "too much" or "too little" of every conceivable combination of thought, feeling, and action. This can range from too much restlessness, talkativeness, and grandiosity, which are among the diagnostic criteria for manic episodes, to too little passion about life or "not caring anymore," which are signal features for depression. Taken together, such discursive environments comprise a virtual "troubled identity" market, geared up to construct more kinds of problem-ridden selves than ever.

Needless to say, not all identities are medicalized, nor do they all become the targets of psychotherapeutic efforts. Self-construction extends across the wide variety of human service institutions and

beyond, to the pastoral care and spiritual fellowships offered by churches and the behavioral rehabilitation programs imposed on violent offenders in prison. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), for example, is decidedly nonmedical and construes uncontrollable drinking as a moral failure. Failure here entails a refusal to recognize that one's actions are not self-governed but are lodged in "higher powers."

There also are plenty of going concerns that feature mainly positive self-images, seeking to valorize or glamorize the self rather than to cement and reformulate troubled identities. Formalized avocational affiliation, for example, puts people in touch with significant resources for self-construction. From international associations like the Sierra Club to local senior centers, recreational organizations offer activities, training, and challenges that both explicitly and implicitly supply self-building opportunities. Mountain climbers, cyclists, and go-cart racers, along with martial artists, wilderness skiers, scuba divers, and myriad others, find that the social sites of their activities provide not only recreation but also diverse ways of viewing and articulating identity. Such discursive environments may be just as consequential for self-construction as those that construct and heal the troubled.

The ubiquity and variety of venues for self-construction suggest an important transformation in linkage between the personal and the social self: in a postmodern world, the traditional relationship between the personal self and society is reversed. From a *modern* point of view, while the personal self is viewed as socially influenced, it also is believed to have its own private location separate from society, a space centered in personal experience. In this context, social life is important for growth and development, but, in excess, it can be portrayed as besieging, saturating and commodifying identity. As we have noted, this view still thrives in our cultural belief system. From this perspective, the personal self is currently being inundated by the heartless intrusions of public life and its engaging social institutions. . . .



In a world understood in *postmodern* terms, however, the relationship between the personal self and society dramatically changes. Social construction moves to foreground, as the personal self is decentered from itself and relocated into myriad going concerns. The personal self, however, does not vanish from the postmodern scene. It persists in the popularly held tenet that an individual agent or subject exists inside or behind the surface appearances of our actions. Most significantly, in a postmodern context, we can see that the sense of a personal identity is being constructed in more social settings than ever. A thriving landscape of institutions serves up myriad selves, providing more and more occasions for constructing who and what we are.

... As with any social context, in each of these environments we must present ourselves in locally familiar terms or risk being seen as eccentric, if not outrageous, in the immediate scheme of things. If we do not proffer recognizable identities, our claims to selfhood might readily be treated as nonsense. To say, for example, "I'm a bloody warclub"—implying "That's me"—does not usually make much sense in our society. It is not a readily recognizable identity. But its meaning may be perfectly clear in a going concern whose vocabulary of identity makes frequent reference to a band of unruly warriors beset by dreams of bloody sacrifice. In fact, it might even make sense in our own society if we found ourselves among members of a survivalist group who share a premonition of enduring a battle with a world rent with evil (cf. Mitchell 1998). The conditions of possibility for self-construction ... have been extended countless ways across the broad horizon of contemporary life's institutional encounters. While some view contemporary life as saturating the self, it also can be seen as providing countless options for what we could be, markedly expanding our potential for self-expression.

#### New and Diverse Options

No single discursive environment determines who and what we are. An individual who presents

himself or herself for counseling at a psychoanalytically oriented therapy agency, for example, is likely to witness the self formulated in terms of the familiar Freudian idiom of psychic structures and depth understanding. Troubles for this self would be formulated in the guise of unconscious turmoil in relation to psychosexual development, embedded in the relational past. In contrast, individuals receiving counseling from a "solution-focused" therapy agency would find the self articulated in the very concrete terms of the present, relating to everyday conduct and routine competence. The vestigial past is of no concern for the self here, nor is deep-seated pathology. Troubles are viewed as solvable everyday problems of living, pure and simple. ...

In today's world, the individual has diverse options for self-construction. To some degree, one can choose the environment(s) in which one's self will be constituted. A good deal of personal expression and empowerment is implicated, for example, in choosing between alternative psychotherapeutic modalities. Opt for psychoanalysis and one is apt to become a seething cauldron of unconscious conflicts rooted in early childhood and parental relationships. Select "brief" solution-focused therapy and one is likely to find oneself defined as a generally competent, if confused or misguided, practitioner of everyday life, who merely needs to decide on how he or she will solve surmountable problems of living in the present.

Such freedom of choice is a fairly recent development. Today's range of discursive environments was unheard of a century ago; it was hardly evident until the 1970s. Our forebears likely constructed selves within a relatively narrow range of spiritual, familial, or communal identities. They simply did not encounter the profusion of going concerns and discursive offerings that engage us today. Their lives were not spread across the plethora of sites and situations that now call for distinctive kinds of self-presentation. Self-construction was more straightforward to be sure, and its possibilities were decidedly limited. ...



We even find some traditional parameters of self-construction newly reconfigured. For example, Hochschild's . . . book, *The Time Bind* (1997), suggests that the traditional experiential relationship between work and home has been reversed with respect to where we seek our identities. . . . Most American adults, Hochschild argues, now work outside the home and, thus, engage daily in the institutional life of organizations large and small. This fact represents a major departure from work life earlier in the century. According to Hochschild, for some, the workplace, rather than the home, has become a preferred sanctuary for the personal self, where one finds himself or herself to be most centered and whole.

The family-friendly company called "Amerco," where Hochschild conducted her study, is a case in point. Amerco operates under a Total Quality (TQ) management system, replacing the traditional top-down, scientific framework. It provides a discursive environment that ostensibly empowers workers to make decisions on their own. Amerco's TQ principles not only offer a nurturing atmosphere for workers but also seek to heal the troubled selves that employees often bring to, or develop, in the workplace. In fact, the self itself is firmly recognized as critical to company policy and subject to redesign. . . .

Hochschild points to an unanticipated consequence of TQ's cognitive and emotional involvement in workers' personal lives: it turns the workplace into a home of sorts, a place for self-repair and recentering. This, in turn, encourages a particular kind of self-surveillance. TQ puts a premium on expressing feelings, sharing emotional labor, and cooperating in family-like corporate responsibility. This also puts TQ in the business of reconstructing its participants' personal selves for the greater good of the company and its employees.

A corporate workplace results that competes with the home as a source of identity, and extends even to the core self. According to Hochschild, the enticement to put in long hours at work—called the "time bind"—upsets the traditional work-family

balance. A "third shift" emerges for workers that prompts them to distance themselves from the time-pressured and increasingly rationalized household so they can devote themselves—their selves—to the emotional allures of the company. For many of Amerco's employees, the workplace is more of an experiential haven than they find at home; Amerco offers emotional relief and interpersonal sustenance away from the tumult and turmoil of the domestic front. This arrangement inverts the traditional cultural geography of privacy, making the workplace more of a self-sustaining refuge than the household.

The inversion is not necessarily bad or good. But it cogently illustrates the changing possibilities and options for self-construction [in the] new millennium. The proliferation of going concerns and their discursive environments complicate or relocate self-construction, but it is also enabling in terms of the options presented for constructing and repairing who and what we are, both in the immediate realm of daily living and throughout the life course. . . .

### Inequality of Opportunities

Lest we sound overly sanguine, we must also recognize that these institutional options are not equally distributed across the contemporary social scene. As ubiquitous and varied as self-constructing institutions have become, their discursive environments are not options for everyone. Not everyone is subjected to or has access to the same field of possibilities. For the economically and socially privileged, the landscape of contemporary self-building opportunities may appear to be a smorgasbord of identities, while the less advantaged are more likely to be selectively filtered through the self-constructive processing of going concerns of last resort such as homeless shelters and prisons. . . .

For those who are disturbed, addicted, impoverished, or otherwise destitute, such as individuals seeking admission to shelters or community mental health programs, the selves they become



are soon lodged in one of the few relationships they can afford. They are left with the option of presenting selves that are socially tolerated in order to avail themselves of desperately needed services. . . .

As Michael Schwalbe (1993:341–342) notes, materially disadvantaged persons frequently must submit wholesale to institutional demands on self-presentation as a matter of sheer survival.

Dire exigencies of all sorts may force individuals into constructing particular selves. Those seeking to escape their drinking habits, for instance, may turn to AA for help. Cognizant of no plausible alternative and unaware of the demands of AA, new members may voluntarily enter the twelve-step program, but the price will be the acceptance of an “alcoholic self” that conforms to a distinctly patterned and ritualized organizational discourse. . . . For every work site like Amerco, there is a “heartless,” “faceless” bureaucracy that homogenizes employee selves, consigning them to “Dilbert”-like cubicles that work to ensure that each member remains anonymous and institutionally undistinguished. For every potential client shopping the middle-class psychotherapy market, there is a coerced recipient of court-mandated behavioral therapy or prison-imposed cognitive self change. . . . This is variety, yes, but always at a price.

### Analytic Challenges of a Postmodern Self

As unequally distributed as these options are, taken together they offer increasingly complex and socially differentiated opportunities to the personal self. . . . [W]e can no longer examine self-construction solely in the realm of talk and interaction. . . . To be sure, talk and interaction remain the operating vehicles through which individuals construct selves. But interactional moves—discursive practices—do not fully specify the concrete selves we live by. Neither are selves unfettered performances or situationally convenient presentations. Selves are not just locally presented but are also artifacts of discourses-in-practice, reflecting the moral agendas and material constraints of diverse

going concerns and discursive environments of postmodern life.

Looking beyond but not ignoring talk and interaction, we come upon concrete sites of self-construction and the sources of identity they purvey. For better or worse, the expansion of the human service industry represents an explosion of professional self-constructive venues. Its agents and outlets can be viewed as veritable factories for the production of selves.

In the world of human services, of course, the self is usually located at the heart of social and personal problems and their solutions. In practice, these institutions construct the troubled selves that they need to do their work (Gubrium and Holstein forthcoming). Indeed, each helping profession, with its underlying disciplinary commitment to a particular view of troubles and solutions, is the source or a distinctive kind of troubled identity. . . .

This not only yields a broad spectrum of troubled selves, but an equally broad range of untroubled ones. For all the troubled selves that are being produced, there are also institutional mandates to replace each and every one of them with an untroubled self. Each organization, agency, or profession that designates a self-in-trouble is likely to be charged with repairing that troubled self, turning out its untroubled counterpart. More broadly, each instance of a troubled self also serves to show us *what we are not*, populating an equally large counterlandscape of positive identities. As Emile Durkheim (1964) taught us long ago, we need the visible presence of the “pathological” to assure us of what is “normal,” suggesting that just as we have more troubled selves than ever before, we now have more untroubled ones as well.

The human service professions, of course, are not solely responsible for the propagation of troubled identities. The scientific and academic communities as well as the popular media also serve up troubled and untroubled selves. Indeed, self-construction is now also being undertaken in opposition to professional efforts. On any given Sunday, for example, local newspapers announce



literally dozens of self-help groups, which offer innumerable self-constructive opportunities for persons from all walks of life: victims of depression, parents of the troubled or gifted, alcoholics, codependents of substance abusers, cancer sufferers, survivors of cancer, Gulf War veterans, victims of sexual assault, perpetrators of domestic violence, AIDS victims, the friends and significant others of Alzheimer's disease sufferers, and transvestites and their spouses, among many others. We look for ways to structure identity on our own, so much so that Robert Wuthnow (1994) estimates that 40 percent of the U.S. population now participates in such discussion groups.

Add to this the human interest programming we see on television and in print, and it is clear that identity-conferring opportunities are amply available. Ordinary life has become an emporium of self-constructive options. Images of special or sullied selves come alive and are acted out before our very eyes on television talk shows, facilitated, if not encouraged, by the likes of Oprah Winfrey, Jenny Jones, and Ricki Lake. . . . We see models of every conceivable kind of persona one might become, from cover girls to superstar athletes to serial killers, cocaine addicts, and road ragers.

And, like it or not, the "sciences of the self"—from psychology and psychoanalysis to sociology and anthropology—have lent their voices to the popular cacophony. Public discourse often commandeers the language of the academic disciplines to describe their senses of everyday subjectivity. Roles, status, peer pressure, socialization, culture and subculture, self-esteem, reinforcement, defense mechanisms, denial, and countless other technical terms are now familiar to just about everyone, regardless of education or training. The popular discourse of the self brings the academy and the clinic right into the living room, if not fully into the bedroom. . . . What began with intellectual forays by . . . Mead and Cooley is now integral even to the self-constructive rantings of Dr. Laura and Jerry Springer. Everyday parlance echoes them all. The

challenge on this front is surely obvious, the analytic implication being that we can no longer view these discursive environments in isolation. Rather, we need to consider the myriad overlapping, intersecting going concerns that shape the self.

Last but not least, these developments implicate a complex moral climate, challenging us to view them in positive as well as negative terms. For some, such as Gergen and Hochschild (especially in *The Managed Heart*), the social landscape has become a coercive, "iron cage-like" environment of options for the self. Cast this way, institutions tyrannically impose limited conditions of possibility for self-construction, bordering on molding, if not determining, the selves we become. The numerous institutional demands placed on the self heighten the sense that self-construction is now beyond personal control. This is the dark side of a postmodern world as it relates to who and what we are, and can be.

Another, more optimistic, overlay suggests that contemporary life presents us with an ever-expanding, even emancipating, horizon of possibilities. Today, we are offered unprecedented opportunities for what could be done to construct selves that comfortably accommodate the biographical particulars of our lives. A thousand going concerns provide us with these opportunities: a thousand more proffer new and different chances for further growth, as well as a basis for challenging existing constructions. This is the positive side of a postmodern world.

Going concerns play a pivotal role in how we view and express ourselves and what we accept within our deepest reaches. To the extent that we inhabit a world of multiple institutional affiliations, we encounter diverse options for discerning even what we presume to be our core identities. We might experience this as either threatening or empowering. Social life is fully penetrating and engrossing; it completely permeates our lives. We cannot escape the social because it is built *into* our very beings. But the important lesson now is that the social is also built *out of* the eminently



variegated going concerns that supply us with identities. Following Gergen, we can read this situation as an indictment of the self-saturating diversification of the postmodern world. But the possibilities for self-construction offered by an unprecedented and expanding horizon of identities can also be morally compelling. Our ability to choose between the options—indeed, to use some options in order to resist others, or to construct new ones—can be as liberating as it is overwhelming and debilitating.

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### Reflective Questions

1. How is the "personal self" under siege in postmodern societies? How and why do people strive to preserve and protect their personal selves? What makes the strategies they commonly use both difficult and risky? For instance, what can result from "hiding the true self deep inside"?
2. How has technology changed the search for and experience of "authentic" selves in the postmodern era? How has it changed the nature of our relationships and self-presentations? What are discursive environments? What are some examples of these environments in your life? How do they influence your experience and expressions of self?
3. Gubrium and Holstein argue that in today's world, we have a broad and diverse range of options for self-construction. In turn, many of us have more freedom of choice in deciding who we are or want to be. Do you agree or disagree with this observation? Why? How do factors such as our age, gender, ethnicity, and income levels affect our abilities to construct valued selves?
4. Previous generations grew up without cell phones and nearly constant Internet interconnectivity. How does growing up with these technologies change life for Millennials? How does it shape their relationships? Long-distance relationships? Interactions with others? How do you think these changes affect the self-constructions and expressions of Millennials? Do they have more freedom to construct and discover selves than their parents or grandparents? Why or why not?





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## The Self and Social Interaction

The self is profoundly and fundamentally social. In addition to emerging through social experience, as discussed in Part IV, the self is sustained and changed through social interaction. As individuals, we continually interact with others. Each of these interactions provides us with reflected images of ourselves. How others respond to us conveys their attitude toward us and, as Cooley and Mead explained, we take each attitude in kind. The self-images reflected in others' responses to us sometimes confirm, occasionally undermine, and gradually alter our sense of self.

We are not, however, passive participants in our interactions. Social interaction is a process of mutual influence. We influence how others define and respond to us as much as they influence us. Through exerting this influence, we can shape the very self-images that others reflect back to us. Moreover, we converse with ourselves, whether interacting with others or alone, and how we talk to ourselves can influence our actions as much as how others respond to us.



The selections in Part V portray how we present, negotiate, and establish selves through social interaction. In doing so, they offer the following insights:

- *We must stage the selves we want to realize in our everyday lives. To have success in these dramaturgical efforts, we must draw upon what Erving Goffman refers to as the arts of impression management.* Like actors on the stage, we must manage elements of our appearance, demeanor, and physical setting to persuade others to see us as a particular kind of person (e.g., an effective teacher, a devoted friend, or a great party host). As Goffman highlights in Selection 19, since other people cannot directly perceive or evaluate our thoughts, feelings, motives, and character, they must depend on signs and symbols to assess who we “really” are. Above all, they must rely on the information that we communicate to them about ourselves, particularly through our role performances and the management of our appearance, emotions, gestures, and speech.
- *When engaging in impression management, we rely on the collaboration of others. In some cases, these others are part of a team that assists us in pulling off a successful performance,* such as a classroom presentation, a dorm party, or a wedding ceremony. In Selection 20, David Grazian illustrates how college-aged heterosexual men rely on elaborate forms of teamwork when engaging in the often unsuccessful pursuit of sexual partners. Grazian also demonstrates how the dramaturgical displays and impression management efforts of these men differ when they are “front stage” in the presence of the women they are pursuing or “back stage” in a dorm room with friends. In addressing this theme Grazian emulates Goffman, revealing how an important structural element of self-presentation is the manipulation of regions, or places that separate our front stage performances from our backstage activities.
- *Because of our abilities to think and converse with ourselves, we can inwardly challenge and counter the self-images that others direct toward us, at least for a while. Our inner conversations may temporarily drown out others’ external voices, especially if they do not offer a unified response. If others define us in similar ways, however, we will have difficulty preventing their voices from echoing throughout our inward conversations.* In Selection 21, Patti and Peter Adler illustrate this point all too well. They highlight the impact and perils of the “gloried self” conferred upon college basketball players. While the players initially tried to resist the accolades and celebrity selves that fans and media sources attribute to them, they ultimately found these reflected appraisals too seductive to reject. The players thus embraced and enacted the gloried and media-based self that others accorded to them. Unfortunately,



while this type of self offers a high level of social value, it also comes with a notable price: the loss of an authentic experience of self and corresponding feelings of self-alienation.

- *Members of some social groups, particularly those disadvantaged by prevailing social inequalities, are likely to have unwanted and stigmatizing identities attributed to them. In an effort to neutralize the "spoiled identities" others assign to them, members of stigmatized groups engage in various types of identity work. In doing so, they strive not only to avoid negative labeling, but also to construct and affirm desirable images of self.* As Snow and Anderson highlight in Selection 22, homeless individuals draw upon differing forms of "identity talk," or narrative strategies, to salvage a sense of self-worth and defend themselves against negative social appraisals. These strategies include distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling. Ironically, when the homeless use these narrative strategies, they engage in patterns of self-presentation that all of us draw upon at times. Indeed, we all employ the techniques of distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling as we do identity work. Thus, in illustrating the forms of identity talk used by the homeless, Snow and Anderson demonstrate the strategies all of us draw upon in our efforts to affirm or salvage valued selves
- *In many contemporary societies, computer technologies have provided individuals with access to new and unique "virtual spaces" for the presentation and realization of selves.* As Simon Gottschalk reveals in Selection 23, interactions in virtual spaces such as Second Life challenge some of Goffman's arguments about the dynamics and boundaries of self-presentation. Virtual worlds offer an array of possibilities for the future, including new, diverse, and unexpected forms of interaction and self-expression. As we become increasingly immersed in these worlds, we can anticipate that our experiences and constructions of self will take on new features. In some cases, these virtual experiences and constructions are likely to promote an enhanced sense of freedom, authenticity, and self-understanding. But, in other cases, these experiences and constructions are likely to have less desirable outcomes, such as fostering a sense of disconnection, hollowness, or fragmentation.

Regardless of where we construct and present selves in the future, we can confidently know that their realization will continue to depend on the arts of impression management and the realm of interaction.



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## The Presentation of Self

ERVING GOFFMAN

*The name Erving Goffman is virtually synonymous with microsociology. Throughout his life, Goffman argued that social interaction should be studied as a topic in its own right. He maintained that social interaction has its own logic and structure, regardless of the participants' personality characteristics or the social organizational and institutional context in which it occurs. That position is the basis for Goffman's very novel and influential analysis of the self. He was not interested in the individual's subjective self or inner conversations but rather in the social definition and construction of the public self during social interaction.*

*Goffman's approach to this topic is commonly described as dramaturgical—that is, Goffman views the self, social interaction, and life as dramatic or theatrical productions. Individuals are social actors who play different parts in the varied scenes of social life. Every time individuals interact with one another, they enact a self, influencing others' definition of them and of the situation. They usually arrive at a working consensus concerning the definition of each other's self and of the situation that consequently guides their interaction. Although social actors' performances are sometimes clumsy and unconvincing, they generally cooperate to save each other's individual shows and their collective show as a whole.*

*Goffman's dramaturgical analysis is more than a creative use of metaphor. We humans cannot peer into one another's hearts and minds, nor can we ever know another's "real" or "true" self. Our knowledge of each other is limited to what we can observe. Our definition of one another's self is necessarily based on appearance, conduct, and the settings in which we interact. In turn, we present a self to one another through how we look and act, and where we go. Regardless of whether these self-presentations are intentional or unintentional, honest or dishonest, they are nonetheless performances. The self is not a material thing that the individual carries around and can show others. It must be dramatically realized on each and every occasion of social interaction.*

*Goffman wrote this selection in the 1950s, and a few of his illustrative examples trade upon prevailing stereotypes of women at that time. Although contemporary readers may find those dated examples to be sexist, they do not detract from Goffman's insight into the drama of everyday social life.*

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socioeconomic status, his

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conception of self, his attitude toward them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc. Although some of this information seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him.

For those present, many sources of information become accessible and many carriers (or "sign-vehicles") become available for conveying this information. If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him. They can also assume from past experience that only individuals of a particular kind are likely to be found in a given social setting. They can rely on what the individual says about himself or on documentary evidence he provides as to who and what he is. If they know, or know of, the individual by virtue of experience prior to the interaction, they can rely on assumptions as to the persistence and generality of psychological traits as a means of predicting his present and future behavior.

However, during the period in which the individual is in the immediate presence of the others, few events may occur which directly provide the others with the conclusive information they will need, if they are to direct wisely their own activity. Many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it. For example, the "true" or "real" attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior. Similarly, if the individual offers the others a product or service, they will often find that during the interaction there will be no time and place immediately available for eating the pudding that the proof can be

found in. They will be forced to accept some events as conventional or natural signs of something not directly available to the senses. In Ichheiser's terms,<sup>1</sup>

[T]he individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself, and the others will in turn have to be *impressed* in some way by him.

Taking communication in both its narrow and broad sense, one finds that when the individual is in the immediate presence of others, his activity will have a promissory character. The others are likely to find that they must accept the individual on faith, offering him a just return, while he is present before them, in exchange for something whose true value will not be established until after he has left their presence. (Of course, the others also live by inference in their dealings with the physical world, but it is only in the world of social interaction that the objects about which they make inferences will purposely facilitate and hinder this inferential process.) The security that they justifiably feel in making inferences about the individual will vary, of course, depending on such factors as the amount of information they already possess about him; but no amount of such past evidence can entirely obviate the necessity of acting on the basis of inferences.

Let us now turn from the others to the point of view of the individual who presents himself before them. He may wish them to think highly of him, or to think that he thinks highly of them, or to perceive how in fact he feels toward them, or to obtain no clear-cut impression; he may wish to ensure sufficient harmony, so that the interaction can be sustained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonize, or insult them. Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others



come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan. Thus, when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity, so that it will convey an impression to others, which it is in his interests to convey. Since a girl's dormitory mates will glean evidence of her popularity from the calls she receives on the phone, we can suspect that some girls will arrange for calls to be made, and Willard Waller's finding can be anticipated:

It has been reported by many observers that a girl who is called to the telephone in the dormitories will often allow herself to be called several times, in order to give all the other girls ample opportunity to hear her paged.<sup>4</sup>

I have said that when an individual appears before others, his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to have. Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain. Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status requires this kind of expression and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. Sometimes the traditions of an individual's role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind, and yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression. The others, in their turn, may be suitably impressed by the individual's efforts to convey something, or may misunderstand the situation and come to conclusions that are warranted neither by the individual's intent nor by the

facts. In any case, insofar as the others act as *if* the individual had conveyed a particular impression, we may take a functional or pragmatic view and say that the individual has "effectively" projected a given definition of the situation and "effectively" fostered the understanding that a given state of affairs obtains.

There is one aspect of the others' response that bears special comment here. Knowing that the individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favorable to him, the others may divide what they witness into two parts: a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part in regard to which he seems to have little concern or control, being chiefly derived from the expressions he gives off. The others may then use what are considered to be the ungovernable aspects of his expressive behavior as a check upon the validity of what is conveyed by the governable aspects. In this a fundamental asymmetry is demonstrated in the communication process, the individual presumably being aware of only one stream of his communication, the witnesses of this stream and of one other. For example, in Shetland Isle one crofter's wife, in serving native dishes to a visitor from the mainland of Britain, would listen with a polite smile to his polite claims of liking what he was eating; at the same time, she would take note of the rapidity with which the visitor lifted his fork or spoon to his mouth, the eagerness with which he passed food into his mouth, and the gusto expressed in chewing the food, using these signs as a check on the stated feelings of the eater. The same woman, in order to discover what one acquaintance (A) "actually" thought of another acquaintance (B), would wait until B was in the presence of A but engaged in conversation with still another person (C). She would then covertly examine the facial expressions of A as he regarded B in conversation with C. Not being in conversation with B, and not being directly observed by him, A would sometimes relax usual constraints and tactful deceptions, and freely express what he was "actually" feeling about B.



This Shetlander, in short, would observe the unobserved observer.

Now given the fact that others are likely to check up on the more controllable aspects of behavior by means of the less controllable, one can expect that sometimes the individual will try to exploit this very possibility, guiding the impression he makes through behavior felt to be reliably informing. For example, in gaining admission to a tight social circle, the participant observer may not only wear an accepting look while listening to an informant, but may also be careful to wear the same look when observing the informant talking to others; observers of the observer will then not as easily discover where he actually stands. A specific illustration may be cited from Shetland Isle. When a neighbor dropped in to have a cup of tea, he would ordinarily wear at least a hint of an expectant warm smile as he passed through the door into the cottage. Since lack of physical obstructions outside the cottage and lack of light within it usually made it possible to observe the visitor unobserved as he approached the house, islanders sometimes took pleasure in watching the visitor drop whatever expression he was manifesting and replace it with a sociable one just before reaching the door. However, some visitors, in appreciating that this examination was occurring, would blindly adopt a social face a long distance from the house, thus ensuring the projection of a constant image.

This kind of control upon the part of the individual reinstates the symmetry of the communication process, and sets the stage for a kind of information game—a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery. It should be added that since the others are likely to be relatively unsuspicious of the presumably unguided aspect of the individual's conduct, he can gain much by controlling it. The others, of course, may sense that the individual is manipulating the presumably spontaneous aspects of his behavior, and seek in this very act of manipulation some shading of conduct that the individual has not managed to control. This again provides

a check upon the individual's behavior, this time his presumably uncalculated behavior, thus re-establishing the asymmetry of the communication process. Here, I would like only to add the suggestion that the arts of piercing an individual's effort as calculated unintentionally seem better developed than our capacity to manipulate our own behavior; so that, regardless of how many steps have occurred in the information game, the witness is likely to have the advantage over the actor, and the initial asymmetry of the communication process is likely to be retained.

When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual and by virtue of any lines of action they initiate to him. Ordinarily, the definitions of the situation projected by the several different participants are sufficiently attuned to one another so that open contradiction will not occur. I do not mean that there will be the kind of consensus that arises when each individual present candidly expresses what he really feels and honestly agrees with the expressed feelings of the others present. This kind of harmony is an optimistic ideal and in any case not necessary for the smooth working of society. Rather, each participant is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable. The maintenance of this surface of agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present feels obliged to give lip service. Further, there is usually a kind of division of definitional labor. Each participant is allowed to establish the tentative official ruling regarding matters which are vital to him but not immediately important to others, e.g., the rationalizations and justifications by which he accounts for his past activity. In exchange for this courtesy, he remains



silent or non-committal on matters important to others but not immediately important to him. We have then a kind of interactional *modus vivendi*. Together, the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation, which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists, but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored. Real agreement will also exist concerning the desirability of avoiding an open conflict of definitions of the situation. I will refer to this level of agreement as a "working consensus." It is to be understood that the working consensus established in one interaction setting will be quite different in content from the working consensus established in a different type of setting. Thus, between two friends at lunch, a reciprocal show of affection, respect, and concern for the other is maintained. In service occupations, on the other hand, the specialist often maintains an image of disinterested involvement in the problem of the client; while the client responds with a show of respect for the competence and integrity of the specialist. Regardless of such differences in content, however, the general form of these working arrangements is the same.

In noting the tendency for a participant to accept the definitional claims made by the others present, we can appreciate the crucial importance of the information that the individual *initially* possesses or acquires concerning his fellow participants; for it is on the basis of this initial information that the individual starts to define the situation and starts to build up lines of responsive action. The individual's initial projection commits him to what he is proposing to be and requires him to drop all pretenses of being other things. As the interaction among the participants progresses, additions and modifications in this initial informational state will of course occur, but it is essential that these later developments be related without contradiction to, and even built up from, the initial positions taken by the several participants. It would seem that an individual can more easily make a choice as to what line of treatment to demand from and extend

to the others present at the beginning of an encounter than he can alter the line of treatment that is being pursued, once the interaction is under way.

In everyday life, of course, there is a clear understanding that first impressions are important. Thus, the work adjustment of those in service occupations will often hinge upon a capacity to seize and hold the initiative in the service relation, a capacity that will require subtle aggressiveness on the part of the server when he is of lower socioeconomic status than his client. W. F. Whyte suggests the waitress as an example:

The first point that stands out is that the waitress who bears up under pressure does not simply respond to her customers. She acts with some skill to control their behavior. The first question to ask when we look at the customer relationship is, "Does the waitress get the jump on the customer, or does the customer get the jump on the waitress?" The skilled waitress realizes the crucial nature of this question. . . .

The skilled waitress tackles the customer with confidence and without hesitation. For example, she may find that a new customer has seated himself before she could clear off the dirty dishes and change the cloth. He is now leaning on the table studying the menu. She greets him, says, "May I change the cover, please?" and, without waiting for an answer, takes his menu away from him so that he moves back from the table, and she goes about her work. The relationship is handled politely but firmly, and there is never any question as to who is in charge.<sup>3</sup>

When the interaction that is initiated by "first impressions" is itself merely the initial interaction in an extended series of interactions involving the same participants, we speak of "getting off on the right foot" and feel that it is crucial that we do so. Thus, one learns that some teachers take the following view:

You can't ever let them get the upper hand on you or you're through. So I start out tough. The first



day I get a new class in, I let them know who's boss. . . . You've got to start off tough, then you can ease up as you go along. If you start out easy-going, when you try to get tough, they'll just look at you and laugh.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, attendants in mental institutions may feel that, if the new patient is sharply put in his place the first day on the ward and made to see who is boss, much future difficulty will be prevented.

Given the fact that the individual effectively projects a definition of the situation when he enters the presence of others, we can assume that events may occur within the interaction which contradict, discredit, or otherwise throw doubt upon this projection. When these disruptive events occur, the interaction itself may come to a confused and embarrassed halt. Some of the assumptions upon which the responses of the participants had been predicated become untenable, and the participants find themselves lodged in an interaction for which the situation has been wrongly defined and is now no longer defined. At such moments the individual whose presentation has been discredited may feel ashamed, while the others present may feel hostile; and all the participants may come to feel ill at ease, nonplussed, out of countenance, embarrassed, experiencing the kind of anomie that is generated when the minute social system of face-to-face interaction breaks down.

In stressing the fact that the initial definition of the situation projected by an individual tends to provide a plan for the co-operative activity that follows—in stressing this action point of view—we must not overlook the crucial fact that any projected definition of the situation also has a distinctive moral character. It is this moral character of projections that will chiefly concern us in this report. Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies

that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. He also implicitly forgoes all claims to be things he does not appear to be and, hence, forgoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals. The others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they *ought* to see as the "is."

One cannot judge the importance of definitional disruptions by the frequency with which they occur, for apparently they would occur more frequently, were not constant precautions taken. We find that preventive practices are constantly employed to avoid these embarrassments and that corrective practices are constantly employed to compensate for discrediting occurrences that have not been successfully avoided. When the individual employs these strategies and tactics to protect his own projections, we may refer to them as "defensive practices"; when a participant employs them to save the definition of the situation projected by another, we speak of "protective practices" or "tact." Together, defensive and protective practices comprise the techniques employed to safeguard the impression fostered by an individual during his presence before others. It should be added that, while we may be ready to see that no fostered impression would survive if defensive practices were not employed, we are less ready perhaps to see that few impressions could survive, if those who received the impression did not exert tact in their reception of it.

In addition to the fact that precautions are taken to prevent disruption of projected definitions, we may also note that an intense interest in these disruptions comes to play a significant role in the social life of the group. Practical jokes and social games are played, in which embarrassments



which are to be taken unseriously are purposely engineered. Fantasies are created, in which devastating exposures occur. Anecdotes from the past—real, embroidered, or fictitious—are told and retold, detailing disruptions which occurred, almost occurred, or occurred and were admirably resolved. There seems to be no grouping which does not have a ready supply of these games, reveries, and cautionary tales, to be used as a source of humor, a catharsis for anxieties, and a sanction for inducing individuals to be modest in their claims and reasonable in their projected expectations. The individual may tell himself through dreams of getting into impossible positions. Families tell of the time a guest got his dates mixed and arrived when neither the house nor anyone in it was ready for him. Journalists tell of times when an all too meaningful misprint occurred, and the paper's assumption of objectivity or decorum was humorously discredited. Public servants tell of times a client ridiculously misunderstood form instructions, giving answers which implied an unanticipated and bizarre definition of the situation.<sup>5</sup> Seamen, whose home away from home is rigorously he-man, tell stories of coming back home and inadvertently asking mother to "pass the fucking butter."<sup>6</sup> Diplomats tell of the time a near-sighted queen asked a republican ambassador about the health of his king. . . .<sup>7</sup>

For the purpose of this report, interaction (that is, face-to-face interaction) may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence. An interaction may be defined as all the interaction which occurs throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another's continuous presence; the term "an encounter" would do as well. A "performance" may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. Taking a particular participant and his performance as a basic point of reference, we may refer to those who contribute the other performances as the audience,

observers, or co-participants. The pre-established pattern of action, which is unfolded during a performance and which may be presented or played through on other occasions, may be called a "part" or "routine." . . .

When an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. In line with this, there is the popular view that the individual offers his performance and puts on his show "for the benefit of other people."

It will be convenient to begin a consideration of performances by turning the question around and looking at the individual's own belief in the impression of reality that he attempts to engender in those among whom he finds himself.

At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. When his audience is also convinced in this way about the show he puts on—and this seems to be the typical case—then, for the moment at least, only the sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the "realness" of what is presented.

At the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine. This possibility is understandable, since no one is in quite as good an observational position to see through the act as the person who puts it on. Coupled with this, the performer may be moved to guide the conviction of his audience only as a means to other ends, having no ultimate concern in the conception that they have of him or of the situation. When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term "sincere" for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance.



It should be understood that the cynic, with all his professional disinvolvement, may obtain unprofessional pleasures from his masquerade, experiencing a kind of gleeful spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously.

It is not assumed, of course, that all cynical performers are interested in deluding their audiences for purposes of what is called "self-interest" or private gain. A cynical individual may delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community, etc. For illustrations of this we need not appeal to sadly enlightened showmen, such as Marcus Aurelius or Hsun Tzu. We know that in service occupations practitioners who may otherwise be sincere are sometimes forced to delude their customers, because their customers show such a heartfelt demand for it. Doctors who are led into giving placebos, filling-station attendants who resignedly check and recheck tire pressures for anxious women motorists, shoe clerks who sell a shoe that fits but tell the customer it is the size she wants to hear—these are cynical performers whose audiences will not allow them to be sincere. . . .

[W]hile the performance offered by impostors and liars is quite flagrantly false and differs in this respect from ordinary performances, both are similar in the care their performers must exert in order to maintain the impression that is fostered. Whether an honest performer wishes to convey the truth or whether a dishonest performer wishes to convey a falsehood, both must take care to enliven their performances with appropriate expressions, exclude from their performances expressions that might discredit the impression being fostered, and take care lest the audience impute unintended meanings. Because of these shared dramatic contingencies, we can profitably study performances that are quite false in order to learn about ones that are quite honest.

In our society, the character one performs and one's self are somewhat equated, and this self-as-character is usually seen as something housed

within the body of its possessor, especially the upper parts thereof, being a nodule, somehow, in the psychobiology of personality. I suggest that this view is an implied part of what we are all trying to present, but provides, just because of this, a bad analysis of the presentation. In this report, the performed self was seen as some kind of image, usually creditable, which the individual on stage and in character effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him. While this image is entertained *concerning* the individual, so that a self is imputed to him, this self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.

In analyzing the self, then, we are drawn from its possessor, from the person who will profit or lose most by it; for he and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time. And the means for producing and maintaining selves do not reside inside the peg; in fact, these means are often bolted down in social establishments. . . .

The whole machinery of self-production is cumbersome, of course, and sometimes breaks down, exposing its separate components. . . . But well oiled, impressions will flow from it fast enough to put us in the grips of one of our types of reality—the performance will come off, and the firm self accorded each performed character will appear to emanate intrinsically from its performer. . . .

In developing the conceptual framework employed in this report, some language of the stage



was used. . . . [However], this report is not concerned with aspects of theater that creep into everyday life. It is concerned with the structure of social encounters—the structure of those entities in social life that come into being whenever persons enter one another's immediate physical presence. The key factor in this structure is the maintenance of a single definition of the situation, this definition having to be expressed, and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude of potential disruptions.

A character staged in a theater is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence man; but the *successful* staging of either of these types of false figures involves use of *real* techniques—the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations. Those who conduct face-to-face interaction on a theater's stage must meet the key requirement of real situations, they must expressively sustain a definition of the situation, but this they do in circumstances that have facilitated their developing an apt terminology for the interactional tasks that all of us share.

### Notes

1. Gustav Ichheiser, "Misunderstandings in Human Relations," supplement to *The American Journal of Sociology*, LV (September 1949), pp. 6–7.
2. Willard Waller, "The Rating and Dating Complex," *American Sociological Review* 11: 730.
3. W. F. White, "When Workers and Customers Meet," Chap. VII, *Industry and Society*, ed. W. F. White (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1946), pp. 132–33.
4. Teacher interview quoted by Howard S. Becker, "Social Class Variations in the Teacher-Pupil Relationship," *Journal of Educational Sociology*, XXV, p. 459.
5. Peter Blau, "Dynamics of Bureaucracy" (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, Columbia

University [1955], University of Chicago Press), pp. 127–29.

6. Walter M. Beattie, Jr., "The Merchant Seamen" (unpublished M.A. Report, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, 1950), p. 35.
7. Sir Frederick Poisson, *Recollections of Three Reigns* (New York: Dutton, 1952), p. 46.

### Reflective Questions

1. According to Goffman, what kind of information do people try to acquire about one another or bring into play during their interactions? Why is this information important? How does it shape the nature of their interactions with others?
2. Why do we seek to control the impressions that others have of us? What are the key elements of impression management? How do we manage these elements as we present ourselves to others in various situations? How do we project a "definition of the situation" through the appearances we present to others? How and why are "first impressions" important in this process?
3. How do we "play a part" when presenting ourselves to others? For instance, how do we play a part when going on a job interview, attending a sporting event, listening to a lecture, or hosting a party for friends? Do we often have to "stage" and perform aspects of ourselves as we interact with others? Do we have to give a convincing performance of the self that we claim in order to get it validated by others?
4. What is Goffman's view of the self? Does he regard it as primarily personal or social in nature? For example, does he discuss it as an individual possession or as something others grant to us situationally based on our performances?
5. Visit the social media pages of four or five of your friends. How do they present themselves in their social media profiles? What aspects of themselves do they highlight? What aspects do they conceal? Are they involved in what Goffman describes as impression management? Are we necessarily engaged in the process of impression management when we present ourselves to others?



## The Girl Hunt

DAVID GRAZIAN

*In the previous selection, Erving Goffman articulated a dramaturgical approach to social life. According to this approach, social life mirrors theater, and we are like actors on a stage in our everyday interactions. To realize desired selves, we must be "good actors" who can adeptly engage in the arts of impression management, manipulating props, masks, moods, and settings to persuade others to validate the selves we present. Our selves, then, are dramatic effects—they become established through convincing performances and depend on the responses of others.*

*Goffman recognized that our efforts to realize desired selves rely on others not only as audiences but also as collaborators. That is, when we engage in the process of presenting and enacting selves, we often depend on a performance "team," or a set of others who cooperate with us in staging a ritual or routine. Moreover, our performances take place in two different kinds of regions. Some of our behavior takes place "front stage" before an audience, in a setting where we try to maintain an appropriate appearance for the part we are playing. Other behavior occurs "backstage," in a region separated from our audience of primary concern. When we are backstage, we can prepare for our front-stage performance or, in some cases, act in ways that knowingly contradict the front-stage appearances we present. In analyzing the interpersonal ritual known as "the girl hunt," David*

*Grazian demonstrates the elaborate forms of teamwork engaged in by college-aged heterosexual men as they try to display and establish their masculinity, particularly by negotiating sexual liaisons with young, attractive women. Grazian also illustrates how these men engage in backstage behavior, such as "pregaming," which prepares them for the ritual and collaborative activities they will perform when taking part in girl hunts. Most crucially, Grazian reveals why heterosexual college men so frequently participate in these hunts, even though they so rarely result in sexual relations with women. The hunts serve as rituals that allow the men to bond with one another and realize desired selves through dramaturgical displays of masculinity. These displays are designed as much for each other as for the women they pursue.*

*In addressing these themes, Grazian's article illustrates a larger point highlighted by Goffman. Whether we like it or not or know it or not, our behavior is expressive: it announces and establishes who we are in a given interaction.*

**Y**oung urbanites identify downtown clusters of nightclubs as direct sexual marketplaces, or markets for singles seeking casual encounters with potential sex partners (Laumann et al. 2004). . . . In this article I examine girl hunting—a practice whereby adolescent heterosexual men aggressively

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seek out female sexual partners in nightclubs, bars, and other public arenas of commercialized entertainment. I emphasize the performative nature of contemporary flirtation rituals by examining how male-initiated games of heterosexual pursuit function as strategies of impression management in which young men sexually objectify women to heighten their own performance of masculinity. While we typically see public sexual behavior as an interaction between individuals, I illustrate how these rituals operate as collective and homosocial group activities conducted in the company of men.

### The Performance of Masculinity as Collective Activity

According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, masculinity represents a range of dramaturgical performances individuals exhibit through face-to-face interaction (Goffman 1959, 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987). Like femininity, masculinity is not innate but an accomplishment of human behavior that appears natural because gendered individuals adhere to an institutionalized set of myths they learn through everyday interactions and encounters, and thus accept as social reality (Goffman 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987). Throughout their formative years and beyond, young men are encouraged by their parents, teachers, coaches, and peers to adopt a socially constructed vision of manhood, a set of cultural beliefs that prescribe what men ought to be like: physically strong, powerful, independent, self-confident, efficacious, dominant, active, persistent, responsible, dependable, aggressive, courageous, and sexually potent (Donaldson 1993; Messner 2002; Mishkind et al. 1986). In the fantasies of many boys and men alike, a relentless competitive spirit, distant emotional detachment, and an insatiable heterosexual desire, all commonly (but not exclusively) displayed by the sexual objectification of women (Bird 1996), characterize idealized masculinity. . . .

In contrast to occupational and educational domains in which masculine power can be signaled by professional success and intellectual superiority,

sexual prowess is a primary signifier of masculinity in the context of urban nightlife. Indeed, the importance placed on competitive "scoring" (Messner 2002) among men in the highly gendered universe of cocktail lounges and singles bars should not be underestimated. However, a wealth of data suggests that, contrary to representations of urban nightlife in popular culture, such as Candace Bushnell's novel *Sex and the City* ([1996] 2001) and its HBO television spin-off, rumors of the proverbial one-night stand have been greatly exaggerated (Williams 2005). According to the National Health and Social Life Survey, relatively few men (16.7 percent) and even fewer women (5.5 percent) report engaging in sexual activity with a member of the opposite sex within two days of meeting them (Laumann et al. 1994: 239). About 90 percent of women aged eighteen to forty-four report that they find having sex with a stranger unappealing (Laumann et al. 1994: 163–65). Findings from the Chicago Health and Social Life Survey demonstrate that, across a variety of city neighborhood types, typically less than one-fifth of heterosexual adults aged eighteen to fifty-nine report having met their most recent sexual partner in a bar, nightclub, or dance club (Mahay and Laumann 2004: 74).

Moreover, the efficacy of girl hunting is constrained by women's ability to resist unwanted sexual advances in public, as well as to initiate their own searches for desirable sex partners. Whereas the ideological basis of girl hunting stresses vulnerability, weakness, and submissiveness as conventional markers of femininity, young women commonly challenge these stereotypes by articulating their own physical strength, emotional self-reliance, and quick wit during face-to-face encounters with men (Duneier and Molotch 1999; Hollander 2002; Paules 1991; Snow et al. 1991). For all these reasons, girl hunting would not seem to serve as an especially efficacious strategy for locating sexual partners, particularly when compared with other methods (such as meeting through mutual friends, colleagues, classmates, or other trusted third parties; common participation in an educational or





recreational activity; or shared membership in a civic or religious organization). In fact, the statistical rareness of the one-night stand may help explain why successful lotharios are granted such glorified status and prestige among their peers in the first place (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:851). But if this is the case, then why do adolescent men persist in hassling women in public through aggressive sexual advances and pickup attempts (Duneier and Molotch 1999; Snow et al. 1991; Whyte 1988), particularly when their chances of meeting sex partners in this manner are so slim?

I argue that framing the question in this manner misrepresents the actual sociological behavior represented by the girl hunt, particularly since adolescent males do not necessarily engage in girl hunting to generate sexual relationships, even on a drunken short-term basis. Instead, three counterintuitive attributes characterize the girl hunt. First, the girl hunt is as much *ritualistic and performative* as it is utilitarian—it is a social drama through which young men perform their interpretations of manhood. Second, as demonstrated by prior studies (Martin and Hummer 1989; Polk 1994; Sanday 1990; Thorne and Luria 1986), girl hunting is not always a purely heterosexual pursuit but can also take the form of an inherently *homosocial* activity. Here, one's male peers are the intended audience for competitive games of sexual reputation and peer status, public displays of situational dominance and rule transgression, and in-group rituals of solidarity and loyalty. Finally, by the emotional effort and logistical deftness required, rituals of sexual pursuit (and by extension the public performance of masculinity itself) encourage some young men to seek out safety in numbers by participating in the girl hunt as a kind of *collective* activity, in which they enjoy the social and psychological resources generated by group cohesion and dramaturgical teamwork (Goffman 1959). Although tales of sexual adventure traditionally feature a single male hero, such as Casanova, the performance of heterosexual conquest more often resembles the

exploits of the dashing Christian de Neuville and his better-spoken coconspirator Cyrano de Bergerac (Rostand 1897). By aligning themselves with similarly oriented accomplices, many young men convince themselves of the importance and efficacy of the girl hunt (despite its poor track record), summon the courage to pursue their female targets (however clumsily), and assist one another in “mobilizing masculinity” (Martin 2001) through a collective performance of gender and heterosexuality. . . .

### Methods and Data

I draw on firsthand narrative accounts provided by 243 heterosexual male college students attending the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League research university situated in Philadelphia. These data represent part of a larger study involving approximately 600 college students (both men and women). The study was conducted at Penn among all students enrolled in one of two semester terms of a sociology course on media and popular culture taught by me during the 2003–4 academic year. Respondents were directed to explore Philadelphia's downtown nightlife by attending at least one nightlife entertainment venue (i.e., restaurant, café, dance club, sports bar, cocktail lounge) located in Philadelphia's Center City district for the duration of a few evening hours' time. They were encouraged to select familiar sites where they would feel both comfortable and safe and were permitted to choose whether to conduct their outing alone or with one or more friends, relatives, intimates, or acquaintances of either gender. . . .

Because young people are likely to self-consciously experiment with styles of public behavior (Arnett 1994, 2000), observing undergraduates can help researchers understand how young heterosexual men socially construct masculinity through gendered interaction rituals in the context of everyday life. But just as there is not one single mode of masculinity but many *masculinities* available to young men, respondents exhibited a variety of socially recognizable masculine roles in their





accounts, including the doting boyfriend, dutiful son, responsible escort, and perfect gentleman. In the interests of exploring the girl hunt as *one among many types* of social orientation toward the city at night, the findings discussed here represent only the accounts of those heterosexual young men whose accounts revealed commonalities relevant to the girl hunt, as outlined above.

### The Girl Hunt and the Myth of the Pickup

As I argue above, it is statistically uncommon for men to successfully attract and “pick up” female sexual partners in bars and nightclubs. However, as suggested by a wide selection of mass media—from erotic films to hardcore pornography—heterosexual young men nevertheless sustain fantasies of successfully negotiating chance sexual encounters with anonymous strangers in urban public spaces (Bech 1998), especially dance clubs, music venues, singles bars, cocktail lounges, and other nightlife settings. According to Aaron, a twenty-one-year-old mixed-race junior:

I am currently in a very awkward, sticky, complicated and bizarre relationship with a young lady here at Penn, where things are pretty open right now, hopefully to be sorted out during the summer when we both have more time. So my mentality right now is to go to the club with my best bud and seek out the ladies for a night of great music, adventure and female company off of the grounds of campus.

Young men reproduce these normative expectations of masculine sexual prowess—what I call *the myth of the pickup*—collectively through homosocial group interaction. According to Brian, a nineteen-year-old Cuban sophomore:

Whether I would get any girl's phone number or not, the main purpose for going out was to try to get with hot girls. That was our goal every night we went out to frat parties on campus, and we all knew it, even though we seldom mention that aspect of going out. *It was implicitly known that tonight, and*

*every night out, was a girl hunt.* Tonight, we were taking that goal to Philadelphia's nightlife. In the meanwhile, we would have fun drinking, dancing, and joking around. (emphasis added)

For Brian and his friends, the “girl hunt” articulates a shared orientation toward public interaction in which the group collectively negotiates the city at night. The heterosexual desire among men for a plurality of women (hot *girls*, as it were) operates at the individual and group level. As in game hunting, young men frequently evaluate their erotic prestige in terms of their raw number of sexual conquests, like so many notches on a belt. Whereas traditional norms of feminine desire privilege the search for a singular and specified romantic interest (Prince Charming, Mr. Right, or his less attractive cousin, Mr. Right Now), heterosexual male fantasies idealize the pleasures of an endless abundance and variety of anonymous yet willing female sex partners (Kimmel and Plante 2005).

Despite convincing evidence to the contrary (Laumann et al. 2004), these sexual fantasies seem deceptively realizable in the context of urban nightlife. To many urban denizens, the city and its never-ending flow of anonymous visitors suggests a sexualized marketplace governed by transactional relations and expectations of personal noncommitment (Bech 1998), particularly in downtown entertainment zones where nightclubs, bars, and cocktail lounges are concentrated. The density of urban nightlife districts and their tightly packed venues only intensifies the pervasive yet improbable male fantasy of successfully attracting an imaginary surplus of amorous single women.

Adolescent men strengthen their belief in this fantasy of the sexual availability of women in the city—the myth of the pickup—through collective reinforcement in their conversations in the hours leading up to the girl hunt. While hyping their sexual prowess to the group, male peers collectively legitimize the myth of the pickup and increase its power as a model for normative masculine



behavior. According to Dipak, an eighteen-year-old Indian freshman:

I finished up laboratory work at 5:00 pm and walked to my dormitory, eagerly waiting to "hit up a club" that night. . . . I went to eat with my three closest friends at [a campus dining hall]. We acted like high school freshmen about to go to our first mixer. We kept hyping up the night and saying we were going to meet and dance with many girls. Two of my friends even bet with each other over who can procure the most phone numbers from girls that night. Essentially, the main topic of discussion during dinner was the night yet to come.

Competitive sex talk is common in male homosocial environments (Bird 1996) and often acts as a catalyst for sexual pursuit among groups of adolescent and young adult males. For example, in his ethnographic work on Philadelphia's black inner-city neighborhoods, Anderson (1999) documents how sex codes among youth evolve in a context of peer pressure in which young black males "run their game" by women as a means of pursuing in-group status. Moreover, this type of one-upmanship heightens existing heterosexual fantasies and the myth of the pickup while creating a largely unrealistic set of sexual and gender expectations for young men seeking in-group status among their peers. In doing so, competitive sexual boasting may have the effect of momentarily energizing group participants. However, in the long run it is eventually likely to deflate the confidence of those who inevitably continue to fall short of such exaggerated expectations and who consequently experience the shame of a spoiled masculine identity (Goffman 1963).

### Preparing for the Girl Hunt Through Collective Ritual

Armed with their inflated expectations of the nightlife of the city and its opportunities for sexual conquest, young men at Penn prepare for the girl hunt by crafting a specifically gendered and

class-conscious nocturnal self (Grazian 2003)—a presentation of masculinity that relies on prevailing fashion cues and upper-class taste emulation. According to Edward, a twenty-year-old white sophomore, these decisions are made strategically:

I hadn't hooked up with a girl in a couple weeks and I needed to break my slump (the next girl you hook up with is commonly referred to as a "slump-bust" in my social circle). So I was willing to dress in whatever manner would facilitate in hooking up.

Among young college men, especially those living in communal residential settings (i.e., campus dormitories and fraternities), these preparations for public interaction serve as *collective rituals of confidence building*—shared activities that generate group solidarity and cohesion while elevating the personal resolve and self-assuredness of individual participants mobilizing for the girl hunt. Frank, a nineteen-year-old white sophomore, describes the first of these rituals:

As I began observing both myself and my friends tonight, I noticed that there is a distinct pre-going-out ritual that takes place. I began the night by blasting my collection of rap music as loud as possible, as I tried to overcome the similar sounds resonating from my roommate's room. Martin seemed to play his music in order to build his confidence. It appears that the entire ritual is simply there to build up one's confidence, to make one more adept at picking up the opposite sex.

Frank explains this preparatory ritual in terms of its collective nature, as friends recount tall tales that celebrate character traits commonly associated with traditional conceptions of masculinity, such as boldness and aggression. Against a soundtrack of rap music—a genre known for its misogynistic lyrics and male-specific themes, including heterosexual boasting, emotional detachment, and masculine superiority (McLeod 1999)—these shared ritual moments of homosociality are a means of generating group resolve and bolstering the





self-confidence of each participant. Again, according to Frank:

Everyone erupted into stories explaining their “high-roller status.” Martin recounted how he spent nine hundred dollars in Miami one weekend, while Lance brought up his cousins who spent twenty-five hundred dollars with ease one night at a Las Vegas bachelor party. Again, all of these stories acted as a confidence booster for the night ahead.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this constant competitive jockeying and one-upmanship so common in male-dominated settings (Martin 2001) often extends to the sexual objectification of women. While getting dressed among friends in preparation for a trip to a local strip club, Gregory, a twenty-year-old white sophomore, reports on the banter: “We should all dress rich and stuff, so we can get us some hookers!” Like aggressive locker-room boasting, young male peers bond over competitive sex talk by laughing about real and make-believe sexual exploits and misadventures (Bird 1996). This joking strengthens male group intimacy and collective heterosexual identity and normalizes gender differences by reinforcing dominant myths about the social roles of men and women (Lyman 1987).

After engaging in private talk among roommates and close friends, young men (as well as women) commonly participate in a more public collective ritual known among American college students as “pregaming.” As Harry, an eighteen-year-old white freshman, explains,

Pregaming consists of drinking with your “boys” so that you don’t have to purchase as many drinks while you are out to feel the desired buzz. On top of being cost efficient, the actual event of pregaming can get any group ready and excited to go out.

The ritualistic use of alcohol is normative on college campuses, particularly for men (Martin and Hummer 1989), and students largely describe pregaming as an economical and efficient way to get drunk before going out into the city. This is especially

the case for underage students who may be denied access to downtown nightspots. However, it also seems clear that pregaming is a bonding ritual that fosters social cohesion and builds confidence among young men in anticipation of the challenges that accompany the girl hunt. According to Joey, an eighteen-year-old white freshman:

My thoughts turn to this girl, Jessica. . . . I was thinking about whether or not we might hook up tonight. . . . As I turn to face the door to 301, I feel the handle, and it is shaking from the music and dancing going on in the room. I open the door and see all my best friends just dancing together. . . . I quickly rush into the center of the circle and start doing my “J-walk,” which I have perfected over the years. My friends love it and begin to chant, “Go Joey—it’s your birthday.” I’m feeling connected with my friends and just know that we’re about to have a great night. . . . Girls keep coming in and out of the door, but no one really pays close attention to them. Just as the “pregame” was getting to its ultimate height, each boy had his arms around each other jumping in unison, to a great hip-hop song by Biggie Smalls. One of the girls went over to the stereo and turned the power off. We yelled at her to turn it back on, but the mood was already lost and we decided it was time to head out.

In this example, Joey’s confidence is boosted by the camaraderie he experiences in a male-bonding ritual in which women—supposedly the agreed-upon *raison d’être* for the evening—are ignored or, when they make their presence known, scolded. As these young men dance arm-in-arm with one another, they generate the collective effervescence and sense of social connectedness necessary to plunge into the nightlife of the city. As such, pregaming fulfills the same function as the last-minute huddle (with all hands in the middle) does for an athletic team (Messner 2002).

It is perhaps ironic that Joey’s ritual of “having fun with my boys” prepares him for the girl hunt (or more specifically in his case, an opportunity to



"hook up" with Jessica) even as it requires those boys to exclude their female classmates. At the same time, this men-only dance serves the same function as the girl hunt: it allows its participants to expressively perform hegemonic masculinity through an aggressive display of collective identification. . . .

This collective attention to popular cultural texts helps peer groups generate common cultural references, private jokes, and speech norms as well as build in-group cohesion (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fine 1977; Swidler 2001).

### **Girl Hunting and the Collective Performance of Masculinity**

Finally, once the locus of action moves to a more public venue such as a bar or nightclub, the much-anticipated "girl hunt" itself proceeds as a strategic display of masculinity best performed with a suitable game partner. According to Christopher, a twenty-two-year-old white senior, he and his cousin Darren "go out together a lot. We enjoy each other's company and we seem to work well together when trying to meet women." Reporting on his evening at a local dance club, Lawrence, a twenty-one-year-old white junior, illustrates how the girl hunt itself operates as collective activity:

We walk around the bar area as we finish [our drinks]. After we are done, we walk down to the regular part of the club. We make the rounds around the dance floor checking out the girls. . . . We walk up to the glassed dance room and go in, but leave shortly because it is really hot and there weren't many prospects.

Lawrence and his friends display their elaborated performance of masculinity by making their rounds together as a pack in search of a suitable feminine target. Perhaps it is not surprising that the collective nature of their pursuit should also continue *after* such a prize has been located:

This is where the night gets really interesting. We walk back down to the main dance floor and stand

on the outside looking at what's going on and I see a really good-looking girl behind us standing on the other side of the wall with three friends. After pointing her out to my friends, I decide that I'm going to make the big move and talk to her. So I turn around and ask her to dance. She accepts and walks over. My friends are loving this, so they go off to the side and watch. . . .

After dancing for a little while she brings me over to her friends and introduces me. They tell me that they are all freshman at [a local college], and we go through the whole small talk thing again. I bring her over to my two boys who are still getting a kick out of the whole situation. . . . My boys tell me about some of the girls they have seen and talked to, and they inform me that they recognized some girls from Penn walking around the club.

Why do Lawrence and his dance partner both introduce each other to their friends? Lawrence seems to gain almost as much pleasure from his *friends'* excitement as from his own exploits, just as they are "loving" the vicarious thrill of watching their comrade succeed in commanding the young woman's attention, as if their own masculinity is validated by his success. In this instance, arousal is not merely individual but represents a collectively shared experience as well (Thorne and Luria 1986: 181). For these young men the performance of masculinity does not necessarily require successfully meeting a potential sex partner as long as one enthusiastically participates in the ritual *motions* of the girl hunt in the company of men. When Lawrence brings over his new female friend, he does so to celebrate his victory with his buddies, and in return, they appear gratified by their *own* small victory by association. (And while Lawrence celebrates with them, perhaps he alleviates some of the pressure of actually conversing with her.)

As Christopher remarked above on his relationship with his cousin, the collective aspects of the girl hunt also highlight the efficacy of conspiring with peers to meet women: "We go out together a





lot. We enjoy each other's company and we seem to work well together when trying to meet women." In the language of the confidence game, men eagerly serve as each other's shills (Goffman 1959; Grazian 2004; Maurer 1940) and sometimes get roped into the role unwittingly with varying degrees of success. . . .

Among young people, the role of the passive accomplice is commonly referred to in contemporary parlance as a *wingman*. . . . In public rituals of courtship, the wingman serves multiple purposes: he provides validation of a leading man's trustworthiness, eases the interaction between a single male friend and a larger group of women, serves as a source of distraction for the friend or friends of a more desirable target of affection, can be called on to confirm the wild (and frequently misleading) claims of his partner, and, perhaps most important, helps motivate his friends by building up their confidence. Indeed, men describe the role of the wingman in terms of loyalty, personal responsibility, and dependability, traits commonly associated with masculinity (Martin and Hummer 1989; Mishkind et al. 1986). According to Nicholas, an eighteen-year-old white freshman:

As we were beginning to mobilize ourselves and move towards the dance floor, James noticed Rachel, a girl he knew from Penn who he often told me about as a potential girlfriend. Considering James was seemingly into this girl, Dan and I decided to be good wingmen and entertain Rachel's friend, Sarah.

Hegemonic masculinity is not only expressed by competitiveness but camaraderie as well, and many young men will take their role as a wingman quite seriously and at a personal cost to their relationships with female friends. According to Peter, a twenty-year-old white sophomore:

"It sounds like a fun evening," I said to Kyle, "but I promised Elizabeth I would go to her date party." I don't like to break commitments. On the other hand, I didn't want to leave Kyle to fend for himself

at this club. . . . Kyle is the type of person who likes to pick girls up at clubs. If I were to come see him, I would want to meet other people as well. Having Elizabeth around would not only prevent me from meeting (or even just talking to) other girls, but it would also force Kyle into a situation of having no "wing man."

In the end, Peter takes Elizabeth to a nightclub where, although he *himself* will not be able to meet available women, he will at least be able to assist Kyle in meeting them:

Behind Kyle, a very attractive girl smiles at me. Yes! Oh, wait. Damn it, Elizabeth's here. . . . "Hey, Kyle," I whisper to him. "That girl behind you just smiled at you. Go talk to her." Perhaps Kyle will have some luck with her. He turns around, takes her by the hand, and begins dancing with her. She looks over at me and smiles again, and I smile back. I don't think Elizabeth noticed. I would have rather been in Kyle's position, but I was happy for him, and I was dancing with Elizabeth, so I was satisfied for the moment.

By the end of the night, as he and Kyle chat in a taxi on the way back to campus, Peter learns that he was instrumental in securing his friend's success in an additional way: "So what ever happened with you and that girl?" I ask. "I hooked up with her. Apparently she's a senior." I ask if she knew he was a freshman. "Oh, yeah. She asked how old you were, though. I said you were a junior. I had to make one of us look older."

Peter's willingness to serve as a wingman demonstrates his complicity in sustaining the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, which therefore allows him to benefit from the resulting "patriarchal dividends"—acceptance as a member of his male homosocial friendship network and its attendant prestige—even when he himself does not personally seek out the sexual rewards of the girl hunt.

In addition, the peer group provides a readily available audience that can provide emotional comfort to all group members, as well as bear witness





to any individual successes that might occur. As demonstrated by the preceding examples, young men deeply value the erotic prestige they receive from their conspiratorial peers upon succeeding in the girl hunt. According to Zach, a twenty-year-old white sophomore:

About ten minutes later, probably around 2:15 am, we split up into cabs again, with the guys in one and the girls in another. . . . This time in the cab, all the guys want to talk about is me hooking up on the dance floor. It turns out that they saw the whole thing. I am not embarrassed; in fact I am proud of myself.

As an audience, the group can collectively validate the experience of any of its members and can also internalize an individual's success as a shared victory. Since, in a certain sense, a successful sexual interaction must be recognized by one's peers to gain status as an in-group "social fact," the group can transform a private moment into a celebrated public event—thereby making it "count" for the male participant and his cohorts.

Of course, as argued above and elsewhere (Lauermann et al. 1994) and demonstrated by the sample analyzed here, turning a heterosexual public encounter with a stranger into an immediately consummated sexual episode is a statistical rarity, especially when compared with the overwhelming degree of time, money, effort, and emotion that young men invest in such an enterprise. But if we focus on the *primary* goal of the girl hunt—the performance of normative masculinity—then it becomes clear that the collectivity of the endeavor allows peer group members to successfully enact traditional gender roles even when they ultimately fail at the sexual pursuit itself. Again, the performance of masculinity does not necessarily require *success* at picking up women, just so long as one participates in the endeavor enthusiastically in the company of men.

For instance, Sam, a twenty-two-year-old black senior, observes how one such peer group takes pleasure in one of their members' public rejection at the hands of an unimpressed woman:

By this time it was around 1:30 am, and the party was almost over. . . . I saw a lot of the guys had their cell phones out while they were talking to the women. I figured the guys were trying to get phone numbers from the girls. So as I walked past one of the guys, I heard him ask a girl for her number. But she just laughed and walked away. That was real funny especially since his friends saw what happened and proceeded to laugh as well.

As young men discover, contrary to popular myths about femininity, it is increasingly uncommon for women to act passively during sexually charged confrontations, even those that may be physically precarious. In such situations, women often resist and challenge the advances of strange men in public through polite refusal or the expression of humor, moral outrage, outright rejection, or physical retaliation (Berk 1977; Hollander 2002; Snow et al. 1991).

Nevertheless, one participant's botched attempt at an ill-conceived pickup can solidify the male group's bonds as much as a successful one. According to Brian, the aforementioned nineteen-year-old Cuban sophomore:

We had been in the club for a little more than half an hour, when the four of us were standing at the perimeter of the main crowd in the dancing room. It was then when Marvin finished his second Corona and by his body gestures, he let it be known that he was drunk enough and was pumped up to start dancing. He started dancing behind a girl who was dancing in a circle with a few other girls. Then the girl turned around and said "Excuse me!" Henry and I saw what happened. We laughed so hard and made so much fun of him for the rest of the night. I do not think any of us has ever been turned away so directly and harshly as that time.

In this instance, Marvin's abruptly concluded encounter with an unwilling female participant turns into a humorous episode for the rest of his peer group, leaving his performance of masculinity bruised yet intact. Indeed, in his gracelessness





Marvin displays an enthusiastic male heterosexuality as emphasized by his drunken attempts to court an unsuspecting target before a complicit audience of his male peers. And as witnesses to his awkward sexual advance, Brian and Henry take pleasure in the incident, as it not only raises their relative standing within the group in comparison with Marvin but can also serve as a narrative focus for future "signifying" episodes (or ceremonial exchanges of insults) and other rituals of solidarity characteristic of joking relationships among male adolescents (Lyman 1987: 155). Meanwhile, these young men can bask in their collective failure to attract a woman without ever actually challenging the basis of the girl hunt itself: the performance of adolescent masculinity. In the end, young men may enjoy this performance of masculinity—the hunt itself—even more than the potential romantic or sexual rewards they hope to gain by its successful execution. In his reflections on a missed opportunity to procure the phone number of a law student, Christopher, the aforementioned twenty-two-year-old senior, admits as much: "There's something about the chase that I really like. Maybe I subconsciously neglected to get her number. I am tempted to think that I like the idea of being on the lookout for her better than the idea of calling her to go out for coffee." While Christopher's excuse may certainly function as a compensatory face-saving strategy employed in the aftermath of another lonely night (Berk 1977), it might also indicate a possible acceptance of the limits of the girl hunt despite its potential opportunities for male bonding and the public display of adolescent masculinity.

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- ## Reflective Questions
1. What is a "girl hunt"? What is the myth of the pickup? Why are young heterosexual men so inclined to go on girl hunts, even though they have a low likelihood of hooking up as a result of these hunts?
  2. How do men prepare themselves for girl hunts through collective rituals? What is the key purpose of these rituals? What behaviors are involved in them? How do these behaviors serve as a way for men to present themselves as masculine?
  3. What is a "wingsman"? What role does he play in the ritual of the girl hunt? How is he involved in dramaturgical teamwork? How does the wingsman take part in the display of hegemonic masculinity?
  4. How do men manage impressions and stage themselves when taking part in girl hunts? What kinds of selves are they allowed to present and realize? How do their self-presentations and collective rituals serve as a way of "managing emotional mood" (see Selection 9)? How does this emotional identity work reinforce gender inequality?

### Reflective Questions

1. What is a "giri hunt"? What is the myth of the pickup? Why are young heterosexual men so inclined to go on giri hunts, even though they have a low likelihood of hooking up as a result of these hunts?
2. How do men prepare themselves for giri hunts through collective rituals? What is the key purpose of these rituals? What behaviors are involved in them? How do these behaviors serve as a way for men to present themselves as masculine?
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4. How do men manage impressions and stage themselves when taking part in giri hunts? What kinds of selves are they allowed to present and realize? How do their self-presentations and collective rituals serve as a way of "managing emotional manhood" (see Selection 9)? How does this emotional identity work reinforce gender inequality?



## The Gloried Self

PATRICIA ADLER AND PETER ADLER

*This selection dramatically illustrates the interrelation between public self-images and individuals' self-concepts or sense of their "true" selves. Patricia and Peter Adler describe how sudden celebrity transformed the self-conceptions of players for a highly successful college basketball program. These players saw themselves reflected not only in others' treatment of them but also on the television screen and in the pages of newspapers and magazines. The Adlers remind us that others' reactions to an individual are not the only source of self-images today. For celebrities at least, the mass media are also a source of stylized and often exaggerated self-images.*

*The Adlers also remind us that individuals are not passively molded by socially reflected or media images of themselves. With the encouragement of their coaches, the players attempted to resist the influence of both the hero worship by fans and media hype. Ultimately, however, the glory was too intoxicating and the media portrayals too seductive. What started out as a mere act to give reporters and fans what they expected became a trap. The more effectively the players presented themselves as the media portrayed them, the more the players thought of themselves in those terms.*

*As the Adlers observe, such celebrity and glory are not without cost. An individual's self-concept is usually multidimensional. It consists of an organized*

*complex of social identities and corresponding self-evaluations. We each may think of ourselves as serious students, good friends, insensitive sons or daughters, relatively unattractive romantic partners, mediocre athletes, and so on. We may consider some of these identities more important than others, but we consider all dimensions of who and what we "really" are. It was just such multidimensionality that the basketball players sacrificed for glory. Their identity as basketball players engulfed other dimensions of their self-concepts. The Adlers describe how the brilliant glory of socially reflected and media self-images can blind an individual to other prior or possible identities. They leave us to ponder the question, what might happen to such an individual's self-concept when his or her glory fades?*

In this paper we describe and analyze a previously unarticulated form of self-identity: the "gloried" self, which arises when individuals become the focus of intense interpersonal and media attention, leading to their achieving celebrity. The articulation of the gloried self not only adds a new concept to our self-repertoire but also furthers our insight into self-concept formation in two ways: it illustrates one process whereby dynamic contradictions between internal and external pressures become resolved, and it highlights the ascendance

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of an unintended self-identity in the face of considerable resistance.

The development of the gloried self is an outgrowth of individuals becoming imbued with celebrity. . . . Development of a gloried self is caused in part by the treatment of individuals' selves as objects by others. A "public person" is created, usually by the media, which differs from individuals' private personas. These public images are rarely as intricate or as complex as individuals' (personal) selves; often, they draw on stereotypes or portray individuals in extreme fashion to accentuate their point. Yet the power of these media portrayals, reinforced by face-to-face encounters with people who hold these images, often causes individuals to objectify their selves to themselves. Individuals thus become initially alienated from themselves through the separation of their self-concept from the conception of their selves held by others. Ultimately, they resolve this disparity and reduce their alienation by changing their self-images to bridge the gap created by others' perceptions of them, even though they may fight this development as it occurs.

Characteristically, the gloried self is a greedy self, seeking to ascend in importance and to cast aside other self-dimensions as it grows. It is an intoxicating and riveting self, which overpowers other aspects of the individual and seeks increasing reinforcement to fuel its growth. Yet at the same time, its surge and display violate societal mores of modesty in both self-conception and self-presentation. Individuals thus become embroiled in inner conflict between their desire for recognition, flattery, and importance and the inclination to keep feeding this self-affirming element, and the socialization that urges them to fight such feelings and behavioral impulses. That the gloried self succeeds in flourishing, in spite of [the] individuals' struggle against it, testifies to its inherent power and its drive to eclipse other self-dimensions.

Drawing on ethnographic data gathered in a college athletics setting, we discuss the creation and the character of the gloried self, showing its

effects on the individuals in whom it develops. . . . Over a five-year period (1980–1985), we conducted a participant-observation study of a major college basketball program. . . . The research was conducted at a medium-sized (6,000 students) private university (hereafter referred to as "the University") in the mid-south central portion of the United States, with a predominantly white, suburban, middle-class student body. The basketball program was ranked in the top 40 of Division I NCAA schools throughout our research, and in the top 20 for most of two seasons. The team played in post-season tournaments every year, and in four complete seasons won approximately four times as many games as it lost. Players generally were recruited from the surrounding area; they were predominantly black (70 percent) and ranged from lower to middle class. . . . We analyze [these] athletes' experiences and discuss the aggrandizing effects of celebrity in fostering the gloried self's ascent to prominence. Then we look at the consequent changes and diminishment in the self that occur as the price of this self-aggrandizement. . . .

### The Experience of Glory

Experiencing glory was exciting, intoxicating, and riveting. Two self-dimensions were either created or expanded in the athletes we studied: the reflected self and the media self. . . .

### The Reflected Self

As a result of the face-to-face interactions between team members and people they encountered through their role as college athletes, the athletes' impressions of themselves were modified and changed. As Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) were the first to propose, individuals engage in role-taking; their self-conceptions are products of social interaction, affected by the reflected impressions of others. According to Cooley (1902), these "looking-glass" selves are formed through a combination of cognitive and affective forces; although individuals react intellectually to the impressions they perceive others are forming about them, they



also develop emotional reactions about these judgments. Together, these reactions are instrumental in shaping their self-images. . . .

The forging and modification of reflected selves began as team members perceived how people *treated* them; subsequently, they formed *reactions* to that treatment. One of the first things they all noticed was that they were sought intensely by strangers. Large numbers of people, individually and in groups, wanted to be near them, to get their autographs, to touch them, and to talk to them. People treated them with awe and respect. One day, for example, the head coach walked out of his office and found a woman waiting for him. As he turned towards her, she threw herself in front of him and began to kiss his feet, all the while telling him what a great man he was. More commonly, fans who were curious about team matters approached players, trying to engage them in conversation. These conversations sometimes made the players feel awkward, because, although they wanted to be polite to their fans, they had little to say to them. Carrying on an interaction was often difficult. As one player said:

People come walking up to you, and whether they're timid or pushy, they still want to talk. It's like, here's their hero talking face-to-face with them, and they want to say anything just so they can have a conversation with them. It's *hero-worshipping*. But what do you actually say to your hero when you see him?

These interactions, then, often took the form of ritualized pseudo-conversations, in which players and their fans offered each other stylized but empty words.

Many fans [identified the players] socially and expect[ed] them to respond in kind. Players found themselves thrust into a "pseudo-intimacy" (Bensman and Lilienfeld 1979) with these fans, who had seen them so often at games and on television. Yet their relationship with the players was one-sided; fans often expected players to reciprocate their feelings of intimacy. As a result of their

celebrity, team members . . . were open to engagement in personal interaction with individuals whom they did not know at all.

Players also found themselves highly prized in interacting with boosters (financial supporters of the team). Boosters showered all players with invitations to their houses for team meetings or dinner. They fought jealously to have players seen with them or gossiped about [them] as having been in their houses. It soon became apparent to players that boosters derived social status from associating with them. . . . This situation caused players to recognize that they were "glory bearers," so filled with glory that they could confer it on anyone by their mere presence. They experienced a sense of the "Midas touch": They had an attribute (fame) that everybody wanted and which could be transmitted. Their ability to cast glory onto others and their desirability to others because of this ability became an important dimension of their new, reflected self-identity.

### The Media Self

A second dimension of the self created from the glory experience was influenced largely by media portrayals. . . . Most of the athletes who came to the University had received some media publicity in high school (68 percent); but the national level of the print and video coverage they received after arriving, coupled with the intensity of the constant focus, caused them to develop more compelling and more salient media selves than they had possessed previously.

Radio, television, and newspaper reporters covering the team often sought out athletes for "human interest" stories. These features presented media-framed angles that cast athletes into particular roles and tended to create new dimensions of their selves. Images were created from a combination of individuals' actual behavior and reporters' ideas of what made good copy. Thus, through media coverage, athletes were cast into molds that frequently were distorted or exaggerated reflections of their behavior and self-conceptions.



Team members, for whom the media had created roles, felt as if they had to live up to these portrayals. For instance, two players were depicted as “good students”—shy, quiet, religious, and diligent. Special news features emphasized their outstanding traits, illustrating how they went regularly to class, were humanitarian, and cared about graduating. Yet one of them lamented:

Other kids our age, they go to the fair and they walk around with a beer in their hand, or a cigarette; but if me and Dan were to do that, then people would talk about that. We can't go over to the clubs, or hang around, without it relaying back to Coach. We can't even do things around our teammates, because they expect us to be a certain way. The media has created this image of us as the “good boys,” and now we have to live up to it.

Other players (about 20 percent) were embraced for their charismatic qualities; they had naturally outgoing personalities and the ability to excite a crowd. These players capitalized on the media coverage, exaggerating their antics to gain attention and fame. Yet the more they followed the media portrayal, the more likely it was to turn into a caricature of their selves. One player described how he felt when trapped by his braggart media self:

I used to like getting in the paper. When reporters came around, I would make those Mohammed Ali type outbursts—I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna do that. And they come around again, stick a microphone in your face, 'cause they figure somewhere Washington will have another outburst. But playing that role died out in me. I think sometimes the paper pulled out a little too much from me that wasn't me. But people seen me as what the paper said, and I had to play that role.

Particular roles notwithstanding, all the players shared the media-conferred sense of self as celebrity. Raised to the status of stars, larger than life, they regularly read their names and statements in the newspaper, saw their faces on television, or heard themselves whispered about on campus.

One team member described the consequences of this celebrity:

We didn't always necessarily agree with the way they wrote about us in the paper, but people who saw us expected us to be like what they read there. A lot of times it made us feel uncomfortable, acting like that, but we had to act like they expected us to, for the team's sake. We had to act like this was what we was really like.

Ironically, however, the more they interacted with people through their dramaturgically induced media selves, the more many of the team members felt familiar and comfortable with those selves (“We know what to do, we don't have to think about it no more”). The media presented the selves and the public believed in them, so the athletes continued to portray them. Even though they attempted to moderate these selves, part of them pressed for their legitimacy and acceptance. Over time, the athletes believed these portrayals increasingly and transformed their behavior into more than mere “impression management” (Goffman 1959). . . . [They] went through a gradual process of . . . becoming more engrossed or more deeply involved in their media selves. The recurrent social situations of their everyday lives served as the foils against which both their public and their private selves developed. The net effect of having these selves placed upon them and of interacting through them with others was that athletes eventually integrated them into their core self.

### Self-Aggrandizement

Athletes were affected profoundly by encounters with the self-images reflected onto them by others, both in person and through the media. It was exciting and gratifying to be cast as heroes. Being presented with these images and feeling obligated to interact with people through them, athletes added a new self to their repertoire: a glorified self. This self had a greater degree of aggrandizement than their previous identities. The athletes may have dreamed of glory, but until now they





had never formed a structured set of relationships with people who accorded it to them. Yet although they wanted to accept and enjoy this glory, to allow themselves to incorporate it into a full-blown self-identity, they felt hesitant and guilty. They wrestled with the competing forces of their desires for extravagant pleasure and pride and the normative guidelines of society, which inhibited these desires. The athletes' struggle with factors inhibiting and enhancing their self-aggrandizement shows how and why they ultimately developed gloried selves.

### Inhibiting Factors

Players knew they had to be careful both about feeling important and about showing these feelings. The norms of our society dictate a more modest, more self-effacing stance. Consequently the players worked hard to suppress their growing feelings of self-aggrandizement in several ways. First, they drew on their own feelings of *fear* and *insecurity*. Although it violated the norms of their peer culture to reveal these feelings, most of the athletes we interviewed (92 percent) had doubts or worries about their playing abilities or futures.

Second, they tried to *discount* the flattery of others as exaggerated or false. . . . Athletes . . . tended to evaluate their behavior less globally than did their audience and to interpret their successes as based less on their own outstanding characteristics than on some complex interaction of circumstances.

Third, the athletes' feelings of importance and superiority were constrained by the actions of the coach and by the norms of their peer subculture. For his part, the coach tried to keep players' self-aggrandizement in check by *puncturing* them whenever he thought they were becoming too "puffed" (conceited). He "dragged" (criticized, mocked) them both in team meetings and in individual sessions, trying to achieve the right balance of confidence and humility.

In addition, players punctured their teammates by ridiculing each other publicly in their informal sessions in the dorms. Each one claimed to be the best

player on the team, and had little praise for others. The athletes did not actually think their teammates had no talent; rather, the peer subculture allowed little room for "glory passing." As a result, except for the braggarts (about 20 percent of the group), none of the players expressed in public how good they felt and how much they enjoyed being treated as stars. Instead, they tried largely to suppress the feelings of excitement, intoxication, and aggrandizement, not to let themselves be influenced by the reflected sense of glory. As one player remarked:

You feel it coming up on you and you know you got to fight it. You can't be letting your head get all out of control.

Fourth, the coach helped to *normalize* the athletes' experiences and reactions by placing them in the occupational perspective. Being adulated was part of the job, he believed, and this job was no more special than any other. . . . He conveyed this sense of occupational duty to his players and assistants. Like him, they had to "get with the program," to play to the public and help support people's sense of involvement with the team. In public, then, players feigned intimacy with total strangers and allowed themselves to be worshiped, meanwhile being told that this was merely a job.

### Enhancing Factors

Yet as tired as they were, as repetitive as this behavior became, the athletes knew that this job was unlike any other. The excitement, the centrality, and the secrecy, which did not exist in the everyday world made this arena different. As one assistant coach explained:

The times were exciting. There was always something going on, something happening, some new event occurring each day. We felt like we were news-makers, we were important. We touched so many more lives, were responsible for so many more people, and so many more people cared, wanted to know something from us. It was very intoxicating. Everyone even close felt the excitement, just from elbow-rubbing.





Athletes also were influenced in their developing feelings of self-importance by the concrete results of their behavior. . . . [T]hey were able to observe the outcomes of their behavior and to use them to form and modify assessments of their selves. Thus, when the team was winning, their feelings of importance, grandeur, talent, and invincibility soared; when they lost, they felt comparatively incompetent, powerless, and small. Because the team's record throughout our research period was overwhelmingly successful, team members reviewed the outcomes of their contests and the season records, and concluded that they were fine athletes and local heroes. . . .

One result of receiving such intense personal interest and media attention was that players developed "big heads." They were admired openly by so many people and their exploits were regarded as so important that they began to feel more notable. Although they tried to remain modest, all of the players found that their celebrity caused them to lose control over their sense of self-importance. As one player observed:

You try not to let it get away from you. You feel it coming all around you. People building you up. You say to yourself that you're the same guy you always were and that nothing has changed. But what's happening to you is so unbelievable. Even when you were sitting at home in high school imagining what college ball would be like, you could not imagine this. All the media, all the fans, all the pressure. And all so suddenly, with no time to prepare or ease into it. Doc, it got to go to your head. You try to fight it, and you think you do, but you got to be affected by it, you got to get a big head.

Although the players fought to normalize and diminish their feelings of self-aggrandizement, they were swept away in spite of themselves by the allure of glory, to varying degrees. Their sense of glory fed their egos, exciting them beyond their ability to manage or control it. They had never before been such glory-generating figures, had never felt the power that was now invested in them

by the crowds or worshipful fans. They developed deep, powerful feelings affirming how important they had become and how good it felt.

All the members of the University's basketball program developed gloried selves, although the degree varied according to several factors. To some extent, their aggrandizement and glorification were affected by the level of attention they received. Individuals with more talent, who held central roles as team stars, were the focus of much media and fan attention. Others, who possessed the social and interpersonal attributes that made them good subjects for reporters, fruitful topics of conversation for boosters, and charismatic crowd pleasers, also received considerable notice. In addition, those who were more deeply invested in the athletic role were more likely to develop stronger gloried selves. They looked to this arena for their greatest rewards and were the most susceptible to its aggrandizing influence. Finally, individuals resisted or yielded to the gloried self depending on personal attributes. Those who were . . . more modest and more self-effacing tried harder to neutralize the effects and had more difficulty in forging grandiose self-conceptions than those who were boastful or pretentious.

### The Price of Glory

Athletes' self-aggrandizement, as we have seen, was a clear consequence of the glory experience. Self-diminishment was a corresponding and concomitant effect. Athletes paid a price for becoming gloried in the form of self-narrowing or self-erosion. They sacrificed both the multi-dimensionality of their current selves and the potential breadth of their future selves; various dimensions of their identities were either diminished, detached, or somehow changed as a result of their increasing investment in their gloried selves.

### Self-Immediacy

One of the first consequences of the ascent of the gloried self was a loss of future orientation. In all their lives, from the most celebrated player to the least,





these individuals had never experienced such a level of excitement, adulation, intensity, and importance. These sensations were immediate and real, flooding all team members' daily lives and overwhelming them. As a result, their focus turned toward their present situation and became fixed on it.

This reaction was caused largely by the absorbing quality of the moment. During the intensity of the season (and to a lesser extent during the off-season), their basketball obligations and involvements were prominent. When they were lying exhausted in their hotel rooms, hundreds of miles from campus, or on their beds after a grueling practice, the responsibilities of school seemed remote and distant. One player described his state of preoccupation:

I've got two finals tomorrow and one the next day. I should be up in the room studying right now. But how can I get my mind on that when I know I've got to guard Michael Jordan tomorrow night?

Their basketball affairs were so much more pressing, not only in the abstract but also because other people made specific demands on them, that it was easy to relegate all other activities to a position of lesser importance.

Many players who had entered college expecting to prepare themselves for professional or business careers were distracted from those plans and relinquished them (71 percent). The demands of the basketball schedule became the central focus of their lives; the associated physical, social, and professional dimensions took precedence over all other concerns. Despite their knowledge that only two percent of major-college players eventually play in the NBA (Coakley 1986; Leonard and Reyman 1988), they all clung to the hope that they would be the ones to succeed. One of the less outstanding athletes on the team expressed the players' commonly held attitude toward their present and their future:

You have to have two goals, a realistic and an unrealistic. Not really an unrealistic, but a dream. We

all have that dream. I know the odds are against it, but I feel realistically that I can make the NBA. I have to be in the gym every day, lift weights, more or less sacrifice my life to basketball. A lot.

To varying degrees, all players ceased to think about their futures other than as a direct continuation of the present. They were distracted from long-term planning and deferment of gratification in favor of the enormous immediate gratification they received from their fans and from celebrity. What emerged was a self that primarily thought about only one source of gratification—athletic fame—and that imagined and planned for little else.

The players imagined vaguely that if they did not succeed as professional athletes, a rich booster would provide them with a job. Although they could observe older players leaving the program without any clear job opportunities, they were too deeply absorbed in the present to recognize the situation. Ironically, they came to college believing that it would expand their range of opportunities . . . yet they sacrificed the potential breadth of their future selves by narrowing their range of vision to encompass only that which fed their immediate hunger for glory.

### Diminished Awareness

Locked into a focus on the present and stuck with a vision of themselves that grew from their celebrity status, all team members, to varying degrees, became desensitized to the concerns of their old selves. They experienced a heightened sensitivity and reflectivity toward the gloried self and a loss of awareness of the self-dimensions unrelated to glory. Nearly everyone they encountered interacted with them, at least in part, through their gloried selves. As this self-identity was fed and expanded, their other selves tended to atrophy. At times the athletes seemed to be so blinded by their glory that they would not look beyond it. . . .

This diminished awareness had several consequences. First, in becoming so deeply absorbed in their gloried selves, athletes relegated non-athletic





concerns to secondary, tertiary, or even lesser status. These concerns included commitments to friends, relatives, and school. For example, many athletes (54 percent) began each semester vowing that it would be different this time, but each semester they “forgot” to go to class. Reflecting on this occurrence, one player mused:

You don't think, it's not like you goin' to be a bad boy today, or you goin' to pull the wool over someone's eyes. You just plain ol' forget. You sleep through it.

For a while the athletes could ignore the facts and the consequences of their behavior, but this denial wore thin as the semester progressed, and they fell behind more noticeably. Then they moved into a stage of neutralization, blaming boring professors, stupid courses, exhaustion, coaches' demands, or injury.

Second, their new personas were expanded, even in their interactions with friends. Players referred to this situation as being “puffed,” and each accused the others of it:

Sometimes I can't even talk to Rich no more. He's so puffed in the head you can't get him to talk sense, he's lost touch with reality. It's like it's full of jello in there and he's talking a bunch of hot air.

What the athletes sensed as filling the heads of these puffed players was the self-image created by the glory experience.

Third, some athletes plunged into various acts because these acts fed their gloried selves (60 percent). They distanced themselves from their old values and took potentially career-ending risks. For example, when a player who filled a substitute role was “red-shirted” (excused from play without losing his scholarship or expending a year of eligibility) for the year because of injury, he was willing to give up this desirable and protective status when asked to do so by the coach. He was convinced easily, despite his secondary position, that the team could not function without him; like others, he blocked off the warnings and the caution that

stemmed from an awareness of other needs and interests. The same lack of reflectiveness and self-awareness prevented players with chronic injuries, those who were hobbling and could no longer jump, from admitting to themselves that their playing days were over, that their gloried selves had to retire.

### Self-Detachment

For some team members and at times for all, the distinction between their gloried selves and their other selves became more than a separation; the distance and the lack of reflectiveness grew into detachment. In the most extreme cases (18 percent), some athletes developed a barrier between this new, exciting, glamorous self and their old, formerly core selves. They found it increasingly difficult to break through that barrier. They experienced a dualism between these selves, as if occasionally they represented discrete individuals and not multiple facets of the same person; at times, they shifted back and forth between them. Ultimately, the different images became so disparate that they could not be fused, or else individuals became so deeply involved in their gloried selves that they lost control over their efforts to constrain and integrate them. The more these individuals interacted with others through this self, the more it developed a life and a destiny of its own.

For instance, one of the most popular players on the team developed a gloried self that was tied to his self-proclaimed nickname “Apollo.” Charismatic and enthusiastic whenever he was in public, he generated enormous amounts of attention and adulation through his outgoing personality. On the court he would work the crowd, raising their emotions, exhorting them to cheer, and talking brashly to opposing players. Reporters thronged to him, because he was colorful, lively, and quotable. In public settings, he was always referred to by his nickname.

Yet, although this player deliberately had created the Apollo identity, eventually it began to control him. It led him to associate at times with



people who valued him only for that self; it surfaced in interactions with friends when he had not called it forth. It led him to detach himself from responsibility for things he did while in that persona. As he reported:

I had a summer job working for some booster at a gas station. I figured he wanted to show off that he had Apollo pumping his gas. I'd go into my act for the customers and the other employees, how fine I was, lotta times show up late or not at all. I figured he wouldn't fire me. But he did. Looking back, I can't see how I just up and blew that job. That ain't like me. That was Apollo done that, not me.

Other team members, who did not go so far as to create separate identities for their gloried selves, still experienced feelings of bifurcation. Their former selves were mundane and commonplace compared to their new, vibrant selves. These contrasting selves called forth different kinds of character and behavior. At times, the team members found it difficult to think of themselves as integrated persons, incorporating these divergent identities into one overall self. Feelings of fragmentation haunted them.

### Discussion

As we have shown, high school graduates entered the world of college athletics and underwent a fundamental transformation. Thrust into a whirlwind of adulation and celebrity, they reacted to the situation through a process of simultaneous self-aggrandizement and self-diminishment. The gloried self expanded, overpowering all . . . other . . . self-dimensions; it became the aspect of self in which they lived and invested. They immersed themselves single-mindedly in this portion of their selves, and the feedback and gratification they derived from this identity dwarfed their other identities. They had not anticipated this situation, but gradually, as they were drawn into the arena of glory, they were swept away by stardom and fame. Their commitment to the athletic self grew beyond anything they had ever imagined

or intended. Once they had experienced the associated power and centrality, they were reluctant to give them up. They discarded their other aspirations, lost touch with other dimensions of their selves (even to the point of detachment), and plunged themselves into the gloried self.

Athletes' gloried selves arose originally as dramaturgical constructions. Other people, through the media or face to face, conferred these identities on athletes through their expectations of them. Athletes responded by playing the corresponding roles because of organizational loyalty, interactional obligations, and enjoyment. Yet in contrast to other roles, which can be played casually and without consequence, athletes' actions in these roles increased their commitment and their self-involvement in them and made the athletes "more or less unavailable for alternative lines of action" (Kornhauser 1962: 321). The gloried self not only influenced athletes' future behavior but also transformed their self-conceptions and identities. . . . [This] entire process . . . illustrates the relationship between dramaturgical roles and real selves, showing how the former comes to impinge upon and influence the latter.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is the gloried self? Why do athletes often strive to have this kind of self? Where does the gloried self come from? What kinds of interactions did the star basketball players have with fans and boosters? What is "pseudo-intimacy"? What role does it play in shaping the reflected self? What was the "media self"? Does it reflect basketball players' images of themselves?
2. Why was the gloried self problematic for players? Why did players fight against it? How did they keep themselves grounded despite being worshipped as heroes? How did winning and losing affect their self-evaluations?
3. What were the demographics of the student body at the University? How did these demographics differ for the basketball players in this study? A popular football player at an ACC school once commented on the contradictions he experienced as an athlete of color on a predominantly white campus: while white students reached out to touch him when he ran onto the field, the same students crossed the street to avoid him when he walked across campus. How might the backgrounds of the student body and athletes shape the gloried self or the players' response to it? Is it the same for all athletes? For all sports? Why or why not?
4. This study was published in 1989. Since then, the rise of the Internet and reality television has changed the landscape of celebrity. Some celebrities are now famous for nothing more than being famous. How has the gloried self changed as a result? What role does achievement play in the gloried self? How do reality-TV celebrities maintain a gloried self in a fickle market? Why do they try to maintain such a self, especially given its costs?
5. Top Olympic athletes reach the heights of their profession often at a very young age. What happens to their identities and self-evaluations once the Olympic Games are over? What happens to athletes who are predicted to win but fail to perform well during the Games? How do athletes negotiate these challenges to their identities? What other people experience them, or under what circumstances do they experience them? Are these processes unique to athletes and celebrities? Why or why not?





## Salvaging the Self from Homelessness

DAVID SNOW AND LEON ANDERSON

*The Adlers' study of college basketball players illustrates how the reflected appraisals of others profoundly alter individuals' self-conceptions. In the following selection, Snow and Anderson demonstrate how people negotiate identities and defend their self-conceptions from unflattering social appraisals by analyzing the "identity talk" of the homeless. As the authors report, the domiciled (or those fortunate enough not to live on the streets) commonly ignore, often insult, and sometimes harass the homeless. Such demeaning treatment continually reminds the homeless of their "stigmatized status" or spoiled social identity. However, the homeless do not meekly succumb to the influence of such unfavorable self-images. Rather, they actively attempt to salvage some sense of self-worth from the wreckage of their daily encounters with the domiciled.*

*The homeless primarily rely on what Snow and Anderson call identity talk for this purpose. They attempt verbally to convince themselves, one another, and occasionally even the domiciled that they are not who and what their current circumstances, appearance, and conduct seem to suggest. The homeless sometimes verbally distance themselves from their apparently spoiled social identity by claiming a more valued personal identity. Other times, they verbally embrace such seemingly spoiled social identities as "bum" or "tramp," while definitionally imbuing these titles with nobility. And they often engage in creative*

*storytelling about their past, their likely future, and even their present.*

On a broader level, the authors of this selection show us that selves are inevitably linked to particular social worlds and to the perspectives, meanings, and practices promoted within those worlds. We all learn to develop self-conceptions, or ideas about who we are, through our interactions with others in specific groups or social circles. We also learn that we can only realize or sustain valued selves within those circles by embracing shared perspectives and engaging in approved forms of identity negotiation. Like the homeless, when we engage in identity talk and manage the impressions of others, we draw upon the "stuff of culture"—values, rules, roles, feelings, meanings, and cherished identities. This "stuff" provides us with the essence of our humanity, especially by enabling us to construct and express a desirable self.

The task the homeless face of salvaging the self is not easy, especially since wherever they turn they are reminded that they are at the very bottom of the status system. As Sonny McCallister lamented shortly after he became homeless, "The hardest thing's been getting used to the way people look down on street people. It's real hard to feel good about yourself when almost everyone you see is looking down on you." Tom Fisk, who had been

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on the streets longer, agreed. But he said that he had become more calloused over time:

I used to let it bother me when people stared at me while I was trying to sleep on the roof of my car or change clothes out of my trunk, but I don't let it get to me anymore. I mean, they don't know who I am, what gives them the right to judge me? I know I'm okay.

But there was equivocation and uncertainty in his voice. Moreover, even if he no longer felt the stares and comments of others, he still had to make sense of the distance between himself and them.

How, then, do the homeless deal with the negative attention they receive or the indifference they encounter as they struggle to survive materially? How do they salvage their selves? . . . We address these questions in the remainder of [this] chapter.

### Constructing Identity-Oriented Meaning

[I]nteraction between two or more individuals minimally requires that they be situated or placed as social objects. In other words, situationally specific identities must be established. Such identities can be established in two ways: they can be attributed or imputed by others, or they can be claimed or asserted by the actor. The former can be thought of as social or role identities in that they are imputations based primarily on information gleaned from the appearance or behavior of others and from the time and location of their action, as when children in a passing car look out the window and yell, "Hey, Mama, look at the street people!" or when junior high school students yell out the windows of their school bus to the homeless lining up for dinner in front of the Sally, "Get a job, you bums!" In each case, the homeless in question have been situated as social objects and thus assigned social identities.

When individuals claim or assert an identity, by contrast, they attribute meaning to themselves. Such self-attributions can be thought of as personal identities rather than social identities, in that they are self-designations brought into play or

avowed during the course of actual or anticipated interaction with others. Personal identities may be consistent with imputed social identities, as when Shotgun claims to be "a tramp," or inconsistent, as when Tony Jones yells back to the passing junior high schoolers, "Fuck you, I ain't no lazy bum!" The presented personal identities of individuals who are frequent objects of negative attention or attention deprivation, as are the homeless, can be especially revealing, because they offer a glimpse of how those people deal interactionally with their pariah-like status and the demeaning social identities into which they are frequently cast. Personal identities thus provide . . . insight into the ways the homeless attempt to salvage the self.

What, then, are the personal identities that the homeless construct and negotiate when in interaction with others? Are they merely a reflection of the highly stereotypic and stigmatized identities attributed to them, or do they reflect a more positive sense of self or at least an attempt to carve out and sustain a less demeaning self-conception?

The construction of personal identity typically involves a number of complementary activities: (a) procurement and arrangement of physical setting and props; (b) cosmetic face work or the arrangement of personal appearance; (c) selective association with other individuals and groups; and (d) verbal construction and assertion of personal identity. Although some of the homeless engage in conscious manipulation of props and appearance—for example, Pushcart with his fully loaded shopping cart, and Shotgun, who fancies himself a con artist—most do not resort to such measures. Instead, the primary means by which the homeless announce their personal identities is verbal. They engage, in other words, in a good bit of identity talk. This is understandable, since the homeless seldom have the financial or social resources to pursue the other identity construction activities. Additionally, since the structure of their daily routines ensures that they spend a great deal of time waiting here and there, they have ample opportunity to converse with each other.



Sprinkled throughout these conversations with each other, as well as those with agency personnel and, occasionally, with the domiciled, are numerous examples of identity talk. Inspection of the instances of the identity talk to which we were privy yielded three generic patterns: (1) distancing; (2) embracement; and (3) fictive storytelling. . . . We elaborate in turn each of [these] generic patterns [and] their varieties. . . .

### Distancing

When individuals have to enact roles, associate with others, or utilize institutions that imply social identities inconsistent with their actual or desired self-conceptions, they often attempt to distance themselves from those roles, associations, or institutions. A substantial proportion of the identity talk we recorded was consciously focused on distancing from other homeless individuals, from street and occupational roles, and from the caretaker agencies servicing the homeless. Nearly a third of the identity statements were of this variety.

### Associational Distancing

Since a claim to a particular self is partly contingent on the imputed social identities of the person's associates, one way people can substantiate that claim when their associates are negatively evaluated is to distance themselves from those associates. This distancing technique manifested itself in two ways among the homeless: disassociation from the homeless as a general social category, and disassociation from specific groupings of homeless individuals.

Categoric associational distancing was particularly evident among the recently dislocated. Illustrative is Tony Jones's comment in response to our initial query about life on the streets:

I'm not like the other guys who hang out down at the Sally. If you want to know about street people, I can tell you about them; but you can't really learn about street people from studying me, because I'm different.

Such categorical distancing also occurred among those individuals who saw themselves as on the verge of getting off the street. After securing two jobs in the hope of raising enough money to rent an apartment, Ron Whitaker indicated, for example, that he was different from other street people. "They've gotten used to living on the streets and they're satisfied with it, but not me!" he told us. "Next to my salvation, getting off the streets is the most important thing in my life." This variety of categorical distancing was particularly pronounced among homeless individuals who had taken jobs at the Sally and thus had one foot off the streets. These individuals were frequently criticized by other homeless for their condescending attitude. As Marilyn put it, "As soon as these guys get inside, they're better than the rest of us. They've been out on the streets for years, and as soon as they're inside, they forget it."

Among the outsiders who had been on the streets for some time and who appeared firmly rooted in that life-style there were few examples of categorical distancing. Instead, these individuals frequently distinguished themselves from other groups of homeless. This form of associational distancing was most conspicuous among those, such as the hippie tramps and redneck bums, who were not regular social-service or shelter users and who saw themselves as especially independent and resourceful. These individuals not only wasted little time in pointing out that they were "not like those Sally users," but were also given to derogating the more institutionally dependent. Indeed, although they are among the furthest removed from a middle-class lifestyle, they sound at times much like middle-class citizens berating welfare recipients. As Marilyn explained, "A lot of these people staying at the Sally, they're reruns. Every day they're wanting something. People get tired of giving. All you hear is gimme, gimme. And we transients are getting sick of it."

### Role Distancing

Role distancing, the second form of distancing employed by the homeless, involves a self-conscious



attempt to foster the impression of a lack of commitment or attachment to a particular role in order to deny the self implied. Thus, when individuals find themselves cast into roles in which the social identities implied are inconsistent with desired or actual self-conceptions, role distancing is likely to occur. Since the homeless routinely find themselves being cast into or enacting low-status, negatively evaluated roles, it should not be surprising that many of them attempt to disassociate themselves from those roles.

As did associational distancing, role distancing manifested itself in two ways: distancing from the general role of street person, and distancing from specific occupational roles. The former, which is also a type of categorical distancing, was particularly evident among the recently dislocated. It was not uncommon for these individuals to state explicitly that they should "not be mistaken as a typical street person." Role distancing of the less categorical and more situationally specific type was most evident among those who performed day labor, such as painters' helpers, hod carriers, warehouse and van unloaders, and those in unskilled service occupations, such as dishwashing and janitorial work. As we saw earlier, the majority of the homeless we encountered would avail themselves of such job opportunities, but they seldom did so enthusiastically, since the jobs offered low status and low wages. This was especially true of the straddlers and some of the outsiders, who frequently reminded others of their disdain for such jobs and of the belief that they deserved better, as exemplified by the remarks of a drunk young man who had worked the previous day as a painter's helper: "I made \$36 off the Labor Corner, but it was just nigger work. I'm twenty-four years old, man. I deserve better than that."

Similar distancing laments were frequently voiced over the disparity between job demands and wages. We were conversing with a small gathering of homeless men on a Sunday afternoon, for example, when one of them revealed that earlier

in the day he had turned down a job to carry shingles up a ladder for \$4 an hour because he found it demeaning to "do that hard a work for that low a pay." Since day-labor jobs seldom last for more than six hours, perhaps not much is lost monetarily in foregoing such jobs, in comparison to what can be gained in pride. But even when the ratio of dollars to pride appears to make rejection costly, as in the case of permanent jobs, dissatisfaction with the low status of menial jobs may prod some homeless individuals to engage in the ultimate form of role distancing by quitting currently held jobs. As Ron Whitaker recounted the day after he quit in the middle of his shift as a dishwasher at a local restaurant:

My boss told me, "You can't walk out on me." And I told her, "Fuck you, just watch me. I'm gonna walk out of here right now." And I did. "You can't walk out on me," she said. I said, "Fuck you, I'm gone."

The foregoing illustrations suggest that the social identities lodged in available work roles are frequently inconsistent with the desired or idealized self-conceptions of some of the homeless. Consequently, "bitching about," "turning down," and even "blowing off" such work may function as a means of social-identity disavowal, on the one hand, and personal-identity assertion on the other. Such techniques provide a way of saying, "Hey, I have some pride. I'm in control. I'm my own person." This is especially the case among those individuals for whom such work is no longer just a stopgap measure but an apparently permanent feature of their lives.

### **Institutional Distancing**

An equally prevalent distancing technique involved the derogation of the caretaker agencies that attended to the needs of the homeless. The agency that was the most frequent object of these harangues was the Sally. Many of the homeless who used it described it as a greedy corporation run by inhumane personnel more interested in lining their own pockets than in serving the needy. Willie



Hastings claimed, for example, that "the major is money-hungry and feeds people the cheapest way he can. He never talks to people except to gripe at them." He then added that the "Sally is supposed to be a Christian organization, but it doesn't have a Christian spirit. It looks down on people. . . . The Salvation Army is a national business that is more worried about making money than helping people." Ron Whitaker concurred, noting on another occasion that the "Sally here doesn't nearly do as much as it could for people. The people who work there take bags of groceries and put them in their cars. People donate to the Sally, and then the workers there cream off the best." Another straddler told us after he had spent several nights at the winter shelter, "If you spend a week here, you'll see how come people lose hope. You're treated just like an animal."

Because the Salvation Army is the only local facility that provides free shelter, breakfast, and dinner, attention is understandably focused on it. But that the Sally would be frequently derogated by the people whose survival it facilitates may appear puzzling at first glance, especially given its highly accommodative orientation. The answer lies in part in the organization and dissemination of its services. Clients are processed in an impersonal, highly structured assembly line-like fashion. The result is a leveling of individual differences and a decline in personal autonomy. Bitching and complaining about such settings create psychic distance from the self-implied and secure a modicum of personal autonomy. This variety of distancing, though observable among all of the homeless, was most prevalent among . . . individuals [who] have used street agencies over a long period of time. [T]heir self-concepts are . . . deeply implicated in them, thus necessitating distancing from those institutions and the self-implied. Criticizing the Sally, then, provides some users with a means of dealing with the implications of their dependency on it. It is, in short, a way of presenting and sustaining a somewhat contrary personal identity. . . .

### Embracement

Embracement connotes a person's verbal and expressive confirmation of acceptance of and attachment to the social identity associated with a general or specific role, a set of social relationships, or a particular ideology. So defined, embracement implies that social identity is congruent with personal identity. Thus, embracement involves the avowal of implied social identities, rather than their disavowal, as in the case of distancing. Thirty-four percent of the identity statements were of this variety.

### Role Embracement

The most conspicuous kind of embracement encountered was categoric role embracement, which typically manifested itself by the avowal and acceptance of street-role identities, such as tramp and bum. Occasionally we would encounter an individual who would immediately announce that he or she was a tramp or a bum. A case in point is provided by our initial encounter with Shotgun, when he proudly told us that he was "the tramp who was on the front page of yesterday's newspaper." In that and subsequent conversations, his talk was peppered with references to himself as a tramp. He said, for example, that he had appeared on a television show in St. Louis as a tramp and that he "tramped" his way across the country, and he revealed several "cons" that "tramps use to survive on the road."

Shotgun and others like him identified themselves as traditional "brethren of the road" tramps. A number of other individuals identified themselves as "hippie tramps." When confronted by a passing group of young punk-rockers, for instance, Gimpy Dan and several other hippie tramps voiced agreement with the remark one made that "these kids will change but we'll stay the same." As if to buttress this claim, they went on to talk about "Rainbow," . . . [an] annual gathering of old hippies which functions in part as a kind of identity-reaffirmation ritual. For these street people, there



was little doubt about who they were; they not only saw themselves as hippie tramps, but they embraced that identity both verbally and expressively.

This sort of embracement also surfaced on occasion with skid row-like bums, as was evidenced by Gypsy Bill's repeated references to himself as a bum. As a corollary of such categoric role embracement, most individuals who identified themselves as tramps or bums adopted nicknames congruent with these roles, such as Shotgun, Boxcar Billie, Gypsy Bill, and Pushcart. Such street names thus symbolize a break with their domiciled past and suggest, as well, a fairly thoroughgoing embracement of life on the streets.

Role-specific embracement was also encountered occasionally, as when Gypsy would refer to himself as an "expert dumpster diver." Many street people occasionally engage in this survival activity, but relatively few pridefully identify with it. Other role-specific survival activities embraced included panhandling, small-time drug-dealing, and performing, such as playing a musical instrument or singing on a street corner for money. "Rhyming Mike" . . . made his money by composing short poems for spare change from passers-by, and routinely referred to himself as a street poet. For some homeless individuals, then, the street roles and routines they enact function as sources of positive identity and self-worth.

#### Associational Embracement

A second variety of embracement entails reference to oneself as a friend or as an individual who takes his or her social relationships seriously. Gypsy provides a case in point. On one occasion, he told us that he had several friends who either refused or quit jobs at the Sally because they "weren't allowed to associate with other guys on the streets who were their friends." Such a policy struck him as immoral. "They expect you to forget who your friends are and where you came from when you go to work there," he told us angrily. "They asked me to work there once and I told them, 'No way! I'm a bum and I know who my friends are.' Self-identification

as a person who willingly shared limited resources, such as cigarettes and alcohol, also occurred frequently, particularly among self-avowed tramps and bums.

Associational embracement was also sometimes expressed in claims of protecting buddies. . . . [For example,] JJ and Indio repeatedly said they "looked out for each other." When Indio was telling about having been assaulted and robbed while walking through an alley, JJ said, almost apologetically, "It wouldn't have happened if I was with you. I wouldn't have let them get away with that." Similar claims were made to one of us, as when two [individuals] said one evening after an ambiguous encounter with a clique of half a dozen other street people, "If it wasn't for us, they'd have had your ass."

Although protective behaviors that entailed risk were seldom observed, protective claims, and particularly promises, were heard frequently. Whatever the relationship between such claims and action, they not only illustrate adherence to the moral code of "what goes around, comes around," but they also express the claimant's desire to be identified as a trustworthy friend.

#### Ideological Embracement

The third variety of embracement entails adherence to an ideology or an alternative reality and the avowal of a personal identity that is cognitively congruent with that ideology. Banjo, for example, routinely identifies himself as a Christian. He painted on his banjo case "Wealth Means Nothing Without God," and his talk is sprinkled with references to his Christian beliefs. He can often be found giving testimony about "the power and grace of Jesus" to other homeless around the Sally, and he witnesses regularly at the Central Assembly of God Church. Moreover, he frequently points out that his religious beliefs transcend his situation on the streets. As he told us once, "It would have to be a bigger purpose than just money to get me off the streets, like a religious mission."

A source of identity as powerful as religion, but less common, is the occult and related alternative



realities. Since traditional occupational roles are not readily available to the homeless as a basis for identity, and since few street people have the material resources that can be used for construction of positive personal identities, it is little wonder that some of them find in alternative realities locus for a positive identity. [For example,] Tanner Sutton identifies himself as a "spirit guide" who can see into the future, prophesying, for instance, that "humans will be transformed into another life form."

Like mainstream religious traditions and occult realities, conversionist, restorative ideologies such as that associated with Alcoholics Anonymous, provide an identity for some homeless people who are willing to accept AA's doctrine and adhere to its program. Interestingly, AA's successes seldom remain on the streets. Consequently, those street people who have previously associated with AA seldom use it as a basis for identity assertion. Nonetheless, it does constitute a potentially salient identity peg. . . .

### Fictive Storytelling

A third form of identity talk engaged in by the homeless is fictive storytelling about past, present or future experiences and accomplishments. WE characterize as fictive stories those that range from minor exaggerations of experience to full-fledged fabrications. We observed two types of fictive storytelling: embellishment of the past and present, and fantasizing about the future. Slightly more than a third of the identity statements we recorded fell into one of these two categories.

### Embellishment

By *embellishment*, we refer to the exaggeration of past or present experiences with fanciful and fictitious particulars so as to assert a positive personal identity. Embellishment involves enlargement of the truth, an overstatement of what transpired or is unfolding. Embellished stories, then, are only partly fictional.

Examples of embellishment for identity construction abound among the homeless. Although

a wide array of events and experiences, ranging from the accomplishments of offspring to sexual and drinking exploits and predatory activities, were embellished, such storytelling was most commonly associated with past and current occupational and financial themes. The typical story of financial embellishment entailed an exaggerated claim regarding past or current wages. A case in point is provided by a forty-year-old homeless man who spent much of his time hanging around a bar boasting about having been offered a job as a Harley-Davidson mechanic for \$18.50 per hour, although at the same time he constantly begged for cigarettes and spare change for beer.

Equally illustrative of such embellishment was an encounter we overheard between Marilyn, who was passing out discarded burritos, and a homeless man in his early twenties. After this fellow had taken several burritos, he chided Marilyn for being "drunk." She yelled back angrily, "I'm a sheetrock taper and I make 14 bucks an hour. What the fuck do you make?" In addition to putting the young man in his place, Marilyn thus announced to him and to others overhearing the encounter her desired identity as a person who earns a good wage and must, therefore, be treated respectfully. Subsequent interaction with her revealed that she worked only sporadically, and then most often for not much more than minimum wage. There was, then, a considerable gap between claims and reality.

Disjunctures between identity assertions and reality appear to be quite common and were readily discernible on occasion, as in the case of a forty-five-year-old [man] from Pittsburgh who had been on the streets for a year and who was given to substantial embellishment of his former military experiences. On several occasions, he was overheard telling about "patrolling the Alaskan/Russian border in Alaskan Siberia" and his encounters with Russian guards who traded him vodka for coffee. Since there is no border between Alaska and Siberia, it is obvious that this tale is outlandish. Nonetheless, such tales, however embellished, can be construed as attempts to communicate specifics



about the person and the person's sense of self. Additionally, they focus a ray of positive attention on the storyteller and thereby enable him or her to garner momentarily a valued resource that is typically in short supply on the streets.

### Fantasizing

The second type of fictive storytelling among the homeless is verbal fantasizing, which involves the articulation of fabrications about the speaker's future. Such fabrications place the narrator in positively framed situations that seem far removed from, if at all connected to, his or her past and present. These fabrications are almost always benign, usually have a Walter Mitty/pipe dream quality to them, and vary from fanciful reveries involving little self-deception to fantastic stories in which the narrator appears to be taken in by his or her constructions.

Regardless of the degree of self-deception, the verbal fantasies we heard were generally organized around one or more of four themes: self-employment, money, material possessions, and women. Fanciful constructions concerning self-employment usually involved business schemes. On several occasions, for example, Tony Jones told us and others about his plans to set up a little shop near the university to sell leather hats and silver work imported from New York. In an even more expansive vein, two [men] who had befriended each other seemed to be scheming constantly about how they were going to start one lucrative business after another. Once, we overheard them talking about "going into business" for themselves, "either roofing houses or rebuilding classic cars and selling them." A few days later, they were observed trying to find a third party to bankroll one of these business ventures, and they even asked us if we "could come up with some cash."

An equally prominent source of fanciful identity construction is the fantasy of becoming rich. Some of the homeless just daydreamed about what they would do if they had a million dollars.

Pat Manchester, for instance, assured us that, if he "won a million dollars in a lottery," he was mature enough that he "wouldn't blow it." Others made bold claims about future riches without offering any details. And still others confidently spun fairly detailed stories about being extravagant familial providers in the future, as Tom Fisk did when he returned to town after a futile effort to establish himself in a city closer to his girlfriend. Despite his continuing financial setbacks, he assured us. I'm going to get my fiancé a new pet monkey, even if it costs a thousand dollars. And I'm going to get her two parrots too, just to show her how much I love her."

Fanciful identity, assertions were also constructed around material possessions and sexual encounters with women. These two identity pegs were clearly illustrated one evening among several homeless men along the city's major nightlife strip. During the course of making numerous overtures to passing women, two of the fellows jointly fantasized about how they would attract these women in the future. "Man, these chicks are going to be all over us when we come back into town with our new suits and Corvettes," one exclaimed. The other added, "We'll have to get some cocaine, too. Cocaine will get you women every time." This episode and fantasy occurred early in the second month of our fieldwork, and we quickly came to learn that such fantasizing was fairly commonplace and that it was typically occasioned by "women-watching," which exemplifies one of the ways in which homeless men are both deprived of attention and respond to that deprivation.

One place homeless men would often watch women was along a jogging trail in one of the city's parks adjacent to the river. Here, on warm afternoons, they would drink beer and call out to women who jogged or walked along the trail or came to the park to sun themselves. Most of the women moved nervously by, ignoring the overtures of the men. But some responded with a smile, a wave, or even a quick "Hi!" Starved for female attention,



the homeless men are quick to fantasize, attributing great significance to the slightest response. One Saturday afternoon, for example, as we were sitting by the jogging trail drinking beer with Pat Manchester and Ron Whitaker, we noticed several groups of young women who had laid out blankets on the grassy strip that borders the trail. Pat and Ron were especially interested in the women who were wearing shorts and halter tops. Pat called out for them to take their tops off. It was not clear that they heard him, but he insisted, "They really want it. I can tell they do." He suggested we go over with him to "see what we can get," but he was unwilling to go by himself. Instead, he constructed a fantasy in which the young women were very interested in him. Occasionally, the women glanced toward us with apprehension, and Pat always acted as though it was a sign of interest. "If I go over there and they want to wrap me up in that blanket and fuck me," he said, "man, I'm going for it." Nonetheless, he continued to sit and fantasize, unwilling to acknowledge openly the obdurate reality staring him in the face.

Although respectable work, financial wealth, material possessions, and women are intimately interconnected in actuality, only one or two of the themes were typically highlighted in the stories we heard. Occasionally, however, we encountered a particularly accomplished storyteller who wove together all four themes in a grand scenario. Such was the case with the [man] from Pittsburgh who told the following tale over a meal of bean stew and stale bread at the Sally, and repeated it after lights-out as he lay on the concrete floor of the winter warehouse: "Tomorrow morning I'm going to get my money and say, 'Fuck this shit.' I'm going to catch a plane to Pittsburgh and tomorrow night I'll take a hot bath, have a dinner of linguine and red wine in my own restaurant, and have a woman hanging on my arm." When encountered on the street the next evening, he attempted to explain his continued presence on the streets by saying, "I've been informed that all my money is tied up in a

legal battle back in Pittsburgh," an apparently fanciful amplification of the original fabrication. . . .

### Conclusion

Many of the homeless are, [then], active agents in the construction and negotiation of identities as they interact with others. They do not, in other words, passively accept the social identities their appearance sometimes exudes or into which they are cast. This is not to suggest that the homeless do not sometimes view themselves in terms of the more negative, stereotypical identities frequently imputed to them. One afternoon, for example, we encountered Gypsy stretched out on a mattress in the back of his old car. Drunk and downhearted, he muttered glumly:

I've just about given up on life. I can't get any work and all my friends do is keep me drunk. Crazy, just crazy—that's all I am. Don't have any desire to do anything for myself. This car is all I've got, and even it won't work. It's not even worth trying. I'm nothing but an asshole and a bum anymore.

But on other occasions, as we have seen, Gypsy was not only more cheerful but even managed to cull shreds of self-respect and dignity from his pariah-like existence. Moreover, we found that self-deprecating lamentations like Gypsy's were relatively rare compared to the avowal of positive personal identities. This should not be particularly surprising, since every human needs to be an object of value and since the homeless have little to supply that sense of value other than their own identity-construction efforts. . . .

In this chapter we have explored the ways the homeless deal with their plight . . . by attempting to construct and maintain a sense of . . . self-worth that helps them stay afloat. Not all of the homeless succeed, of course. The selves of some have been so brutalized that they are abandoned in favor of alcohol, drugs, or out-of-this-world fantasies. And many would probably not score high on a questionnaire evaluating self-esteem. But the issue for



us has not been how well the homeless fare in comparison to others on measures of self-esteem, but that they do, in fact, attempt to salvage the self, and that this struggle is an ongoing feature of the experience of living on the streets.

The homeless we studied are not the only individuals who have fallen or been pushed through the cracks of society who nevertheless try to carve a modicum of . . . personal significance out of what must seem to those perched higher in the social order as a [meaningless] void. Other examples of such salvaging work have been found in mental hospitals, concentration camps, and among black street corner men. In these and presumably in other such cases of marginality, the attempt to carve out and maintain a sense of . . . self-worth seems especially critical for survival because it is the one thread that enables those situated at the bottom to salvage their humanity. It follows, then, that it is not out of disinterest that some people find it difficult to salvage their respective selves, but that it results instead from the scarcity of material and social resources at their disposal. That many of the homeless are indeed able to . . . secure a measure of self-worth testifies to their psychological resourcefulness and resolve, and to the resilience of the human spirit.

#### Reflective Questions

1. Reflect on a mild stigma you have experienced in your life (such as the stigma of being a nondrinker, a nail-biter, an agnostic, a bald man, an overweight woman, or a person with acne). Analyze the role this stigma plays in your life, relating it to concepts discussed in this reading. What is the nature of your "deviance" and why is it viewed unfavorably? What social reactions are generated by your behavior/attitude/appearance? In what situations? From which people? How do you "neutralize," manage, or overcome the stigmatizing reactions of others? Are these stigma management strategies similar to the identity talk engaged in by the homeless?
2. Draw a picture of a homeless person and write a related description. What images come to mind for you? That is, what do you think a homeless person looks like? What physical characteristics does he or she have? For instance, what is his or her race and gender? What led him or her to become homeless? Where does he or she hang out? What does he or she act like when interacting with others? Where do you think your images of the homeless come from? How did this reading influence your images and understandings of the homeless?
3. Think of a time when you were labeled negatively by an authority figure, a parent, a friend, or someone else significant to you. How powerful was the label? Did it influence how others responded to you? Did it affect your perceptions of and feelings about yourself? Did you use any of the strategies highlighted in this reading to counteract the negative label or its effects? Did you eventually overcome, transform, or shed the label? How and why?
4. Describe a "deviant" behavior or person in one of your group contexts (e.g., a residence hall, church group, fraternity, work group, or friendship circle). Why is the behavior (or person) you are analyzing viewed as deviant in your group? What rules are being violated? What social reactions are elicited by this "deviance"? Are these reactions stigmatizing? Who is most actively involved in defining the behavior (or person) as deviant? What does the "deviant" person do to neutralize or counteract negative reactions from others? How effective are these neutralization or management strategies?



## The Presentation of Self in Virtual Spaces

SIMON GOTTSCHALK

Erving Goffman's selection on the presentation of self suggested that in everyday social life we do not simply take the attitude of others toward ourselves but actively influence their attitude toward us. We do so by managing their impressions of us. We thereby elicit social validation for the kind of person or self we want to be and contribute to the social construction of our own selves. Physical characteristics like skin color, secondary sexual characteristics, and bodily markers of age are difficult, although not always impossible, to conceal. The clothes we can afford to buy and places we can afford to frequent constrain our presentations of selves. Moreover, many people whom we encounter in everyday life have prior knowledge of us, either directly or indirectly. The self that we present to them must be at least minimally consistent with that prior knowledge if we hope to avoid being considered a fraud. Although we influence the self that others attribute to us in everyday social life and assume different selves in different situations, our freedom of self-presentation has definite limits.

Contemporary computer technology has expanded our freedom of self-presentation by creating new realms of social interaction and self-construction. Some of these realms, referred to as "social virtual spaces," offer an incredible array of possibilities for interaction and identity building. In this selection, Simon

Gottschalk explores how the presentation of self in the realm of Second Life both resembles and differs from the presentation of self in everyday social life. Gottschalk studied Second Life as a participant observer for several months and conducted interviews with a number of people in a variety of Second Life sites. On the basis of the information he gathered, Gottschalk documents how interaction and self-presentation in this virtual world challenge some of Goffman's key arguments.

Gottschalk demonstrates how Second Life serves as a new realm of social being that offers new opportunities for selfhood. Participants in this virtual world are free to construct selves (as avatars) based on their imaginations and their abilities to buy, acquire, or build a variety of bodily resources, including hair, body parts, body shapes, and even different types of skin. The avatars they create may or may not correspond to their "real" physical and social characteristics, although the residents of Second Life typically construct avatars that bear some resemblance to their everyday selves. Most crucially, these residents often revel in the freedom they have to create avatar-selves unconstrained by genetics, aging, habit, or unhappy circumstances. Indeed, because of this freedom, participants in Second Life may feel as if their avatar-selves more genuinely reflect who they "really are" than their everyday roles or identities.

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*As Gottschalk implies, participants often experience Second Life as a playful and enjoyable social world where they can experience new kinds of relationships and identities. Yet the playful elements of this world do not detract from its seriousness. Many people develop meaningful relationships in Second Life (or other cyberworlds) and become deeply committed to one or another of their cyberselves. For some, this commitment has rewarding and self-fulfilling consequences, but for others, it has tragic results, including broken or severely damaged virtual and nonvirtual relationships.*

*As people spend greater amounts of time online and technological advances lead to new possibilities for representation and interaction, we can expect them to continue exploring new types of virtual experiences, relationships, and selves. We can also anticipate that their presentations of self will take on new manifestations. What we don't yet know is how people's involvement in emerging virtual communities will affect their understandings and experiences of self. "Will their virtual involvements lead to a more fragmented, disconnected, and inauthentic sense of self?" Or, will the emergence of new virtual worlds and possibilities allow people to experience more genuine, meaningful, and coherent selves? While Gottschalk acknowledges the flawed and consumeristic elements of virtual spaces such as Second Life, he also highlights how they can serve as promising arenas for altruism, community, and self-exploration.*

#### **Welcome to Second Life**

*A place to be, be different, be yourself,  
Free yourself, free your mind,  
Change your mind, change your look,  
Be Anyone.*

—Promotional messages on the Second Life website, [www.SecondLife.com](http://www.SecondLife.com)

“I know we're meeting as avatars, but don't forget that there are real people with real emotions on the other side of the screen,” writes/says Yael.<sup>1</sup> Or rather her avatar, who goes by the name of Becky. A fiftyish Israeli woman who lives in Arizona, Yael spends about eight hours a day in Second Life.

Dahlia, one of her best friends (both in real life and Second Life), once told me she is worried that Yael is getting “increasingly confused” between these two lives. But then, Dahlia also told me that Second Life has allowed her “self to soar.” Annette—the avatar of a fortyish French sociologist—confides that about a year ago, she had to completely exile herself from Second Life because of the real emotional pains she endured as a result of a failed virtual romantic relationship there. As I soon discovered, this confusion is not unusual. On the other hand, the very concept of confusion is itself perhaps simplistic. . . .

What is Second Life and what am I doing here? Second Life is the Internet's most popular and largest user-created 3-D virtual world community. Produced by UC San Diego graduate Phillip Rosedale in San Francisco's Linden Labs in 2003, Second Life is the virtual home of about 15 million “residents” worldwide who appear to each other (and themselves) as avatars in countless different sites. More than two hundred institutions of higher education have a presence in Second Life, including Yale, Harvard, Stanford, [and] MIT . . . , to name a few. So do the Smithsonian Institution, the Census Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control, and NASA. So do the Holocaust Museum, the Vietnam War Memorial, Woodstock, and many other important sites of collective memory. So do multinational corporations such as Nike, Coca-Cola, Manpower, eBay . . . , Dell, and a host of other Fortune 500 companies. Media outlets such as CNN, BBC, NBC, Reuters, and others have virtual buildings in Second Life. The city of Ontario has a welcoming center here, and Sweden is the first country to have established a virtual embassy on this continent. Second Life has classrooms and planetariums, research centers and aquariums, libraries and auditoriums, hospitals and museums, ashrams and atriums. . . .

Second Life also features countless virtual malls where one can purchase absolutely everything. The first quartile of 2009 reported \$125 million transacted in Second Life—a great chunk of it in virtual real estate. . . .



Second Life fits Book's (2004: 2) definition of a "social virtual world." As she explains, such worlds have six characteristics.

1. Shared Space: the world allows many users to participate at once.
2. Graphical User Interface: the world depicts space visually, ranging in style from 2-D "cartoon" imagery to more immersive 3-D environments.
3. Immediacy: interaction takes place in real time.
4. Interactivity: the world allows users to alter, develop, build, or submit customized content.
5. Persistence: the world's existence continues regardless of whether individual users are logged in.
6. Socialization/Community: the world allows and encourages the formation of in-world social groups like guilds, clubs, cliques, housemates, neighborhoods, and so forth.

The graphical user interface distinguishes social virtual worlds from text-based ones, such as chat rooms, as it enables "residents" of this world to see it, the people who participate in it, and themselves (or rather their avatars), in real time and from every possible angle. They no longer have to write/read about the virtual world and its participants or imagine them (see also Boellstorff 2008). This visual capability is significant, as it enhances the emotional, mental, and physical experience of actually being there. With the recent introduction of a "talk" function, Second Life residents can now also hear and talk to each other using their own voices.

Interactivity and community distinguish social virtual worlds from game-oriented ones. Since residents can alter, develop, build, or submit customized content, the control they have over this world is almost complete. . . . With this capability, residents become creators of this world (and themselves in it) rather than its subjects. As a result, their investments in it are much more significant than in virtual worlds where the landscapes, the residents' range of possible activities, and their appearance

are programmed and cannot be significantly altered (Vicdan and Ulusoy 2008).

Since social virtual worlds encourage socializing and community building, residents come here mainly to explore this constantly growing environment and themselves in it, to educate themselves in a mind-boggling diversity of areas, to work, to acquire and create virtual objects, to interact with others, and to build communities, groups, and enduring associations with them. In contrast to virtual worlds designed around games, there is no "mission" to accomplish, no tower to storm, no dragon to slay, no enemy to kill, [and] no winning or losing. Just creativity and interaction. Second Life is thus constantly changing as residents' creativity, imagination, skills, relations, and projects are evolving. Every day witnesses an exponential increase in the number of residents, sites, groups, activities, and communities—from Grateful Dead fans to gay activists, from Palestinian supporters to Parisian artists, from teachers to transsexuals, from philosophers to "furries" [avatars that are hybrids of humans, animals, and machines]. . . .

[T]he unique characteristics of social virtual spaces I discussed above raise new questions about interaction, self-presentation, and self-construction in virtual spaces. Among those, I am chiefly interested in the following: (1) What are the unique characteristics of interaction in social virtual spaces? (2) What do interactions in social virtual spaces suggest about the self and everyday life in the digital age? (3) How do interactions in social virtual spaces shape the self and everyday life in the digital age? . . . [In] a modest attempt to answer those questions, I have conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews in a wide variety of Second Life sites between October 2008 and July 2009. . . .

### The Virtual Impulse

Virtual worlds are simulations. Like a map, they usually start out as reproducing actual worlds, real bodies and situations; but, like simulations . . . they end up taking a life of their own.

—Rob Shields, *The Virtual*



While Second Life is new, the virtual impulse—the desire for the virtual—is quite ancient (see Boellstorff 2008, Ikegami and Hut 2008, and Shields 2003). From the Lascaux cave paintings to virtual reality, it seems that humans have always sought to articulate, (re)create, and manipulate the “real” through a variety of media. Since culture always shapes its expressions and content, the virtual also constitutes a text where participants express their concerns, fears, myths, hopes, and desires. In her work on “portable communities,” Mary Chayko (2008) defines virtual worlds as “cognitive entities” and “sociomental spaces.” For Book (2004), they are important sites of cultural creativity and (re)production. As liminal spaces, they can be therapeutic and transforming, offering “the opportunity to meet neglected ego needs” and to explore aspects of the self that we hesitate to acknowledge in real life (see Book 2004, Boellstorff 2008, and Daniel 2008).

It is this virtual self that serves as my point of entry into Second Life. How do we construct it, how does it affect us, and what happens to the boundary between “it” and “us”? As contemporary research on computer-mediated communication suggests (Fortunati 2002), it no longer makes sense to distinguish between “online” and “offline” realms. We inevitably manifest our offline self when we interact online, and our online interactions inevitably follow and transform us when we are offline. As Cunningham (2006: 16) puts it, “After virtual reality, ‘reality’ is not the same, but has been altered by the bleeding of both ‘worlds’ into each other, by their mutual inseparability.” . . .

### Avatars R Us

To establish our existence in Second Life, we must first create an avatar—a graphic representation of oneself. When logging onto Second Life for the first time, new residents must choose between twelve “default avatars” (six women and six men). These default avatars look rather flat and two-dimensional, and are poorly dressed by Second Life standards. Newbies are typically recognizable by these underdeveloped features, and more veteran residents have



**Figure 1 Newbie Avatar.**

The clothes are usually dreary and dull, the hair looks like patches of straw pasted on the head. It has poor graphic resolution and looks flat, and the facial features are ill-defined and unattractive in contrast with the looks of more veteran residents (see Fig. 2). Interestingly, however, the more time one spends in Second Life, the more the eyes and mind adjust to those cartoonish features, which can “look” realistic.

Source: <http://npirl.blogspot.com/2008/10/openlifesteve-sima-has-message-for.html>

learned that they can buy, acquire, or build sophisticated and realistic-looking “skins,” hair, body parts, body shapes, a cornucopia of body decorations, and any virtual object they can imagine—from a ring to a private tropical island (see Figs. 1 and 2).

Since the face, body shape, body parts, decorations, and the objects residents wear and display are all (virtual) “sign-vehicles” we use to construct our Second Life self, residents can spend agonizing days and many Lindens sculpting an avatar/self they are satisfied with, regardless of whether it “looks like” their actual physical self. In Second Life, therefore, our digital-physical appearance is no longer determined by genetic baggage or shaped by habit, age, and other natural biological processes. On the contrary, since we can continuously customize every inch or pixel of our avatar, we are now fully responsible for the virtual self we present others. In contrast to Goffman’s (1959: 29)





**Figure 2 The Avatars Voted Most Beautiful in 2009.**

Most avatars who have spent some time in Second Life achieve looks similar to those.  
Source: <http://www.geeksugar.com/13-Most-Beautiful-Avatars-Second-Life-176164>

observations, we no longer possess “a limited range of sign-equipment” and must no longer “make unhappy choices” when (re)presenting ourselves to others. Unsurprisingly, although one can represent oneself in an infinity of ways, most avatars look like their “real” self—only more attractive, more athletic, and typically better endowed (see Fig. 3).

Whether the avatar looks like the person who constructs it has interesting—if unclear—implications. As Book notes (2004:8),

In social world communities there exists a general expectation that avatars should remain at least somewhat faithful to their owners’ offline





**Figure 3 Self/Avatar.**

With skills, residents can produce avatars who bear an uncanny resemblance to their physical selves. According to research, most residents construct avatars who are idealized versions of themselves. This ability to craft with equal ease an avatar who does or does not resemble the physical self has interesting but yet unexplored consequences.

Source: [http://mpop99.com/mypopspace/pages/blog\\_images/secondlife\\_main\\_485.jpg](http://mpop99.com/mypopspace/pages/blog_images/secondlife_main_485.jpg)

appearances because of the fact that many people are there specifically to initiate friendships or even romantic relationships which may at some point extend to the offline world. Because of this expectation, there is a constant tension . . . between the desire to meet standards of attractiveness versus accuracy in portraying offline bodies. While everyone recognizes that avatars are likely to be highly idealized, someone who creates an avatar that is a significant variation from his or her offline body (particularly gender) runs the risk of being perceived by others as a “fake” or worse, as someone who is deliberately trying to deceive their friends. . . . This does not mean that performances of radically different identities don’t happen in social worlds. They do. The difference is that there is greater risk of confusion and misunderstanding between those who use avatars as vehicles of role play and those who presume the avatars are extensions of real offline selves.

On the other hand, because we can represent ourselves in any way we wish, the factuality of those

sociodemographic [characteristics] we display becomes much less important than the perceived consistency between the sign-vehicles we portray and our behaviors. In other words, whether the person behind the young blonde Californian Hippie avatar is “really” young, blonde, Californian, or Hippie matters less than how she performs the persona she claims to be. . . . Paradoxically, however, avatars often change their front and quickly assemble [characteristics] consistent with the persona they wish to portray, the settings in which they find themselves, and those they meet there, in full view of others. In real life, being caught in the backstage of such transformations could lead to embarrassment; here, however, momentary inconsistencies between setting, appearance, and manner are expected and accepted. The potential emotions of shame, embarrassment, “humiliation and sometimes permanent loss of reputation” (Goffman 1959: 59) typically suffered in real life do not have the same inhibitory force. Hence one quickly gets used to the fleeting presence of contradictory codes in the ever-changing fronts of many avatars. An overly muscular and aggressive-looking male avatar turns out to be surprisingly shy and gentle, and an oversexed female avatar dressed in a skimpy outfit turns out to be a devoted and modest Muslim. One interesting paradox, therefore, is that while the visual aspects of avatars give them a more compelling degree of “realness” than the typed self-descriptions of chat room participants (“seeing is believing”), residents also share a consensus that we should not believe what we see but pay attention to the alignment between what avatars look/act like and what/how they write.

In this respect, residents’ willingness to reveal the “real” self behind the avatar varies widely. While some residents share a great deal of information with me about who they are in real life, often e-mailing photographs, giving me their e-mail addresses, and directing me to (real) websites where I can learn more about them, others are quite adamant about their desire to segregate their real-life self from their Second Life avatar. As Lynn,



a French clerk, told me, "I come here to escape from real life, to construct something different. I do not want to discuss it." Most others, it seems, are trying to negotiate the intersections between their real self and their avatar. Dahlia told me that she was once looking for a dress she wanted to wear at a party when she suddenly realized that the dress in question belonged to her avatar's wardrobe. Marla is wondering whether she should feel guilty about the virtual sexual relations she is enjoying in Second Life (she is married). Yael tells me she often implements—in her real-life relations—advice from avatars she met in Second Life, and Vivian had to postpone her plans to launch her (real-life) musician career because her collaboration with another ("soul mate") Second Life musician had reached a dead end.

To elaborate on the famous Thomas theorem, when people define the virtual as real, it becomes real in its consequences, and the reciprocal effects between the self and the avatar extend to more central aspects of one's life as well. As Boellstorff (2008: 148) indicates:

Even residents who were simply shy or withdrawn in the actual world often found that the anonymity and control of a virtual world . . . allowed them to be "more outgoing," a trait that could then transfer back to the actual world. One resident noted how "experimenting with appearance or behavior in Second Life potentially opens up new ways of thinking of things in real life."

In my research, the most interesting case of such blurring must surely be Karen, who had been stuck in an abusive relationship for years and "felt like a prisoner." She went to Second Life and created an avatar (Nina) as a means of escape until one day, as she put it, "Nina took over." Encouraged by the validating encounters and relations Nina/Karen was experiencing in Second Life, Karen decided to model herself after Nina, assuming she would then enjoy the same pleasurable experiences in her real life. She left her abusive relationship and is "a million times happier now."

As Boellstorff (2008: 149) aptly remarks, avatars are "not just placeholders for selfhood, but sites of self-making in their own right," and as those stories suggest, this self-making activity informs our "real life." . . .

[S]ince relations in Second Life tend to be democratic, informal, and equalitarian, could spending an increasing amount of time here result in finding the undemocratic, formal, and hierarchical relations that characterize everyday life in most institutions increasingly intolerable? If we can import a newly found outgoingness from Second Life into real life, can similar transitions obtain for more "serious" types of everyday relations? And with what consequences?

### The Self-Avatar Paradox

*INTERVIEWER: Do you find that Dahlia-the-avatar communicates pretty much like the person behind Dahlia?*

*DAHLIA: Dahlia is Dahlia. There is no difference between the two.*

The second tool that residents use to construct a virtual self and . . . to establish "a significant distinction" is through their typed communication style. Thus, if we can modify at will those aspects of one's appearance Goffman identified as permanent (looks, race, gender), those which he identified as dynamic (manner) are reduced almost solely to one's written communication style—a style that we cannot easily change, especially because the pace of Second Life conversations is typically quick. Interestingly, therefore, those aspects of the "front" we use to present our self and assess the selves others present to us have a different weight and importance than Goffman suggested in his analysis of face-to-face interaction. While we can customize every pixel of our avatar's appearance, we cannot invent communication skills we do not actually possess.

The avatar paradox is that while we can create multiple avatars that look different from each other and nothing like ourselves, they essentially always



communicate in the same way. Our way. In Second Life as in everyday life, we are what/how we communicate, but since the main medium of communication here is the written word, participation in Second Life may very well “force the self out.” In other words, (1) the reduction of many media of communication to just the written one, (2) the disinhibition, hyperpersonal relations, and anonymity characteristic of virtual spaces, and (3) the dynamics of synchronous written conversations all combine to encourage the expression of a self that might be much less rehearsed and performed than in real life. As one of Chayko’s (2008) respondents remarked, “We may even be more ourselves when we are not entangled in face-to-face dynamics and pressures.” Many of my respondents echo this sentiment and believe that their self becomes paradoxically perhaps most perceptible and “true” when they interact as Second Life avatars.

### The Looking-Glass Avatar

*It is possible that interacting through an avatar might stimulate the “observing ego”—the ability to look at oneself objectively and rationally. (Daniel, 2008)*

*Second Life is a lab where we can work on our problems, a useful learning process for the self. The point is to try to use what we’ve learnt here and apply it in the world out there.*

—Marla, interview

Cooley’s concept of the “looking-glass self” nicely synthesizes the idea that the others we interact with reflect us. When we interact with others, we are not solely attending to the particular topic of the interaction but are also assessing how those others respond to us. We accomplish this by attempting to look at ourselves from their viewpoints and using their language, paralinguistic, facial gestures, kinesics, proxemics, sounds, touching, and other actions as signs. As Goffman and scholars associated with the Palo Alto school also emphasized, we communicate and perceive such signs both consciously and unconsciously, and we are typically

more likely to believe those aspects of others’ behaviors that they do not seem to control (the impressions they give off).

On a first level, assessing how others perceive me/my avatar in Second Life is much trickier than in real life, since avatars do not yet possess the full range of facial expressions and kinetic abilities that we take for granted in everyday life. Of course, one can acquire or build “scripts” that will activate the avatar’s body and face. . . . Yet the activation of those scripts requires pressing different keys, which can take time, and the creation of new scripts takes skills, which many avatars do not possess. As a result, unless they click on “pose balls” that activate the avatars in various and context-specific repetitive movements, most avatars’ gestures remain relatively constant, except for a few repetitive facial expressions (blinking eyes) and body movements (leaning forward, crossing one’s arms and legs, breathing, shifting body weight from one leg to another, etc.).

While this massive reduction in the number of media through which we typically communicate sharply diminishes our ability to self-reflect from the other’s points of view, the visual aspect of social virtual worlds allows for more self-reflection than in text-based sites. Here we are no longer just “a product of linguistic manipulation” (Zhao 2005: 402) but can self-reflect and represent ourselves and our actions to others visually.

In addition, since I can actually look at my avatar from the perspective of the person I am interacting with (or any perspective, for that matter; see Fig. 4), I can quickly adjust my appearance and proxemics to better attune to or define the virtual “situation.” For example, to better frame an encounter as an interview, I would invite respondents to “sit down” and would position my avatar so that we were facing each other or looking in the same direction.

On a second level, the ability to look at and experience one’s avatar/self from an external perspective introduces a new and subtler dimension in the experience of self-reflection in social virtual





**Figure 4 The Looking-Glass Avatar.**

Simon Gottschalk's avatar viewed from his informant's perspective. Thanks to the 360-degree viewing abilities of Second Life, one can virtually observe oneself from every point of view, including the point of view of the avatar one is interacting with.

Source: Snapshot taken by Simon Gottschalk

spaces. Mead's notion of the "I-Me" dialogue entails the idea of "mental rehearsals" of various lines of action in response to others' reactions or anticipated reactions to us. Second Life provides the unique opportunity to actually enact those various lines of action and to immediately, visually, and viscerally assess their impact. It provides the now literal (if still virtual) "third party" viewpoint from where I can watch myself/avatar try out different lines of action and see/hear/read how others respond to those. . . . By literally watching others respond to me/my avatar, I now have immediate (if still limited) feedback for my self-presentation and communication patterns. Since those others are—just like me—"real people," and since the consequences for initiating the "wrong" lines of action are minimal, it is not difficult to appreciate how this self-reflecting ability might expand the self's repertoire. As research reports, this expanded repertoire does not vanish once we exit Second Life and re-enter real life. It continues to inform us offline and online in a (hopefully) self-corrective process.

In Second Life, therefore, not only can one educate oneself about a wide variety of topics, gain

new computer skills, explore this expanding virtual continent, meet a constantly changing population, and conduct research, one can also learn about oneself, try out different scripts, and expand one's repertoire of interactional (and hence self) possibilities with others. Because the rules of interaction in Second Life follow different dynamics than in real life, individuals can also experience and explore the self/avatar in unusual and relatively unscripted encounters. Much can be learned about oneself in such interactional conditions.

### Conclusions: The Socio-Virtual Imagination

*People can feel so close to one another, so strongly bonded in portable communities because proximity and presence are perceived by us in ways that transcend the physical.*

—Mary Chayko, *Portable Communities: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Communication*

Social virtual worlds are just emerging, and judging by the substantial financial investments by



universities, hospitals, historical societies, research centers, multinational corporations, political parties, and media outlets, they contain the promise for unimaginable future possibilities. In contrast to other historical and anthropological examples of liminal space, which are/were typically separated from everyday life, social virtual worlds such as Second Life are fully embedded in it. They emerge at a historical moment when we are already spending an increasing amount of our time online (e-mailing, Web surfing, blogging, twittering, etc.), interacting with disembodied others, and establishing our presence and existence electronically. Accordingly, it is not solely the existence of social virtual worlds per se that is interesting, but also their relation to the already virtualized “real” everyday life in the digital age.

Social virtual worlds provide a free “potential space” where real individuals—qua avatars—can and do attempt to create an alternative reality. Here they simultaneously concretize their individualistic fantasies and educate, console, and help each other; fall in love; bare their souls; organize for political causes; share information; develop communities; and enact aspects of their selves they did not know existed, were too embarrassed to admit, or always wanted to master. The disembodied self of e-mails, blogs, websites, and chat rooms is re-embodied as an avatar, who visually interacts with others, is influenced by them, and self-reflects from their perspectives. With their visual and acoustic capacities, promotion of creativity, and emphasis on spontaneous interactivity, social virtual worlds such as Second Life heighten the realism of our participation and the intensity of the emotions we experience there. As a result, the constantly evolving avatar influences the “real” self, who now also orients toward virtual, yet all-too-real others.

By replacing the rigid cultural-structural codes of identity-construction by flexible and recombinant digital ones, we construct and present selves in Second Life that are free to expand, explore, and innovate, and are invited to meet others in radically

different ways. That this avatar typically looks like an idealized version of the self should not be interpreted as proof of deception or fakery. After all, we “naturally” present an idealized version of our self in face-to-face interactions. This tendency expresses common psychological impulses, which are—as I have shown—increasingly stimulated by hypermodern cultural norms. Ultimately, avatars are porous graphic shells through which curious minds interact in a boundless space where everything is virtually possible. As this space evolves and avatars mature, these narcissistic needs will eventually subside.

Social virtual worlds are certainly not utopian. Capitalism is still the “commonsense” principle organizing its economy, and there are residents who still reproduce all the regressive “isms.” But if social virtual worlds are visibly colonized by capitalist greed, violent libidinal impulses, religious intolerance, and narcissistic pride, they are also energized by communitarian longings, altruistic *élans*, progressive projects, educational efforts, spiritual yearnings, and interactional desires.

Psychological playground for narcissist turboconsumers or “cradle of collective intelligence”? Probably both. What seems crucial, however, is that social scientists have never had this kind of access to such an important technology—a technology that invites people to meet, interact, and create alternative forms of association. As sociomental spaces that an increasing number of people will regularly frequent, social virtual worlds such as Second Life are therefore strategic sites that sociologists should not only investigate but also self-consciously shape in the very process of researching and participating in them. They are promising new are(n)as where we can nurture and promote a sociological imagination for the digital age.

#### Note

1. I have given all avatars and informants a pseudonym to protect their privacy and uphold confidentiality.



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## Reflective Questions

1. What is Second Life? How do people experience this virtual space as a "real" world? What distinguishes this social world from game-oriented virtual worlds? What are the unique characteristics of interaction in virtual spaces such as Second Life?
2. How does Second Life serve as an arena for self-presentation? What is an avatar? How do people construct and manage the appearance of their avatars? What is the relationship between an avatar and the self? Do most avatars bear a resemblance to the people who created them? Why? What is the self-avatar paradox?
3. What is the least manageable aspect of the avatars that people present as they interact with others in Second Life? How and why are their communication skills crucial to their self-presentations? Why do some participants in Second Life feel as if the self they present "is most true and perceptible" when they are interacting as avatars?
4. How and why is the experience of "the looking-glass self" more complex in Second Life?
5. How are virtual worlds such as Second Life likely to change our presentations and experiences of self in the future? Will they create new and more fulfilling possibilities for self-expression and social interaction? Or, will they jeopardize and undermine the selves and relationships that characterize our nonvirtual worlds?



PART  
VI

# The Organization of Social Interaction

Social interaction has an organization all its own, apart from the participants' specific characteristics and the larger social environment in which it occurs. Indeed, social interaction is meaningful because it is patterned, organized, and orderly. The individuals participating in an interaction commonly share an implicit understanding of its organization and, therefore, similar expectations of what they and others are likely to do under different circumstances. This shared but implicit understanding turns both action and inaction, the expected and unexpected, into meaningful events. For example, individuals who know one another expect to exchange greetings when they meet. If we walk past people we know without saying hello, they will probably feel snubbed. Our failure to greet them is meaningful, because they expect a greeting. Although we may blatantly ignore expected patterns of interaction, we do so at the risk of sending unintended messages to others, and these messages will have unflattering implications for us.

One of the principal tasks of microsociology is to investigate and describe recurrent patterns of interaction and the principles of their organization. The goal is to understand how individuals achieve mutual understanding and collectively construct meaningful social lives. That is the focus of the selections in this part of



the book. They describe the organization of different aspects of social interaction, explain people's commitment to sustaining orderly patterns of interaction, and illustrate how such patterns of interaction provide the glue of social life.

The selections in Part VI also emphasize the following points:

- *Our everyday interactions are grounded in and guided by interpersonal rituals.* These rituals help us to claim a socially valued self, or "face," through playing our parts appropriately in a given situation. As Erving Goffman emphasizes, the two key organizing principles that underlie interaction are (1) if you have certain social characteristics (e.g., you are a Catholic priest), you have the right to expect that others will treat you as that kind of person; and (2) if you signify to others that you possess these characteristics (e.g., you wear a clerical collar), you should actually be the person you claim to be.
- *We typically engage in tacit agreements with others to protect their "face" and corresponding lines of behavior if they do the same for us.* We also engage in two basic types of face-work, which Goffman describes in Selection 24. Both types enable us to sustain an expressive order that facilitates smooth interactions, positive self-feelings, and a sense of social value. When we use these differing face-work strategies, we demonstrate not only that we are savvy social actors but also that we recognize and abide by prevailing rules of interaction that uphold the sacredness of our own and others' "face."
- *Even in backstage regions of behavior, such as public bathrooms, we abide by and enact interpersonal rituals designed to preserve order and protect our social value.* For instance, as Spencer Cahill illustrates in Selection 25, when we are in public bathrooms we studiously avoid observing or mentioning the toilet-related acts of others, we take steps to ensure that our own bathroom acts are private, we exchange brief greetings with colleagues, we collaborate with others in concealing embarrassing events, we manage our personal fronts, and we prepare for front region interactions. What Cahill shows us, above all, is that even in loosely defined situations such as public restrooms, we maneuver within fairly "tight" social expectations and rules of etiquette.
- *Social relationships have many forms.* They may be more or less distant, or more or less intimate. They may be more or less egalitarian, or more or less hierarchical. Particular social relationships may also assume different forms. They are subject to negotiation and renegotiation every time the involved parties interact. Yet relationships often have enduring features that are grounded in recurrent patterns of interaction. These recurrent patterns are facilitated by group-based codes of conduct. As illustrated in Selection 26,



in some inner-city neighborhoods the guiding code of conduct is known as "the code of the streets." It places a premium on respect and preserving one's reputation for toughness, particularly by displaying a willingness to engage in violence. Guided by this code, inner-city African American youth strive not only to preserve their "face" but also to navigate interactions in a way that will enhance their long-term survival.

- *When someone challenges the interaction order, others hold the person accountable.* At times, people break the rules of interaction, go against the group, or offer up a new interpretation of a situation. In Selection 27, firefighters are trained to control their environment by following a specific set of interaction and interpretation rules. When a firefighter dies after breaking a rule, the death is individualized as their fault. When the rules fail to protect firefighters, however, firefighters are left to make sense of the deaths. When people respond interactionally with disgust, disapproving glances, rebukes, and creative interpretations, they cement the interactional order.

Ultimately, the selections in Part VI demonstrate that social relationships are as flexible and fragile as the interactional rituals and dynamics that sustain them. An unexpected touch, a harsh tone of voice, or a critical comment can radically transform a relationship, threatening cherished self-images and provoking intense feelings that can lead to its demise. Social relationships change along with changing patterns of interaction, and social relationships disappear in the absence of social interaction. They only endure if they are repeatedly constructed through recurring patterns of interaction.



## Face-Work and Interaction Rituals

ERVING GOFFMAN

*Selection 19 by Erving Goffman examined some of the dramatic or theatrical characteristics of social interaction. It described how individuals enact selves and reach a working consensus concerning the respective parts each will play in the course of their interaction. In this selection, Goffman observes that individuals effectively claim positive social value or "face" through the lines they take or parts they perform during interaction. He also argues that individuals are emotionally invested in claiming and maintaining face. The embarrassment we experience when we stumble, forget our lines, or otherwise bungle a social performance clearly demonstrates his argument.*

According to Goffman, the maintenance of face requires that individuals uphold an expressive order. That is, an individual must meet others' expectations of how the type of person that she or he claims to be should act. In turn, others must treat her or him as that type of person. Thus, the maintenance of face depends on an implicit agreement: I will protect your face if you protect mine. We usually honor this agreement because of our common emotional investment in face, resulting in our self-regulated participation in orderly patterns of social interaction.

Goffman describes two basic kinds of face-work that characterize such orderly interaction. The first is self-explanatory: we attempt to avoid places, people, situations, and topics that might threaten our own

or others' face and attempt to ignore events that do. However, we do not always succeed, which necessitates the second kind of face-work, or what Goffman calls the corrective process.

Goffman describes the corrective process as a "ritual" for two reasons. First, it consists of a routine interchange of "moves." When a threat to face occurs, we expect the involved parties to engage in a sequence of familiar acts and interpret the absence of any such moves in terms of that expected pattern. If, for example, an individual who has offended someone fails to offer an apology, we are likely to conclude that he or she is cold and uncaring. This example illustrates how socially expected patterns of interaction turn both action and inaction into meaningful events.

Second, the corrective process is like a religious ritual, expressing individuals' mutual reverence for face. The countless times a day that we say "excuse me," "I'm sorry," and "thank you" indicate just how highly we regard both our own and others' face. Thus, Goffman's characterization of face as "sacred" is at most only a slight exaggeration.

Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants. In each of these contacts, he tends to act out what is sometimes called a line—that is, a pattern of verbal and

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nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself. Regardless of whether a person intends to take a line, he will find that he has done so in effect. The other participants will assume that he has more or less willfully taken a stand, so that if he is to deal with their response to him he must take into consideration the impression they have possibly formed of him.

The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself.

A person tends to experience an immediate emotional response to the face which a contact with others allows him; he cathects his face; his “feelings” become attached to it. If the encounter sustains an image of him that he has long taken for granted, he probably will have few feelings about the matter. If events establish a face for him that is better than he might have expected, he is likely to “feel good”; if his ordinary expectations are not fulfilled, one expects that he will “feel bad” or “feel hurt.” In general, a person’s attachment to a particular face, coupled with the ease with which disconfirming information can be conveyed by himself and others, provides one reason why he finds that participation in any contact with others is a commitment. A person will also have feelings about the face sustained for the other participants; and, while these feelings may differ in quantity and direction from those he has for his own face, they constitute an involvement in the face of others that is as immediate and spontaneous as the involvement he has in his own face. One’s own face and the face of others are constructs of the same order; it is the rules of the group and the definition of the situation which determine how much feeling one is to have for face and how this feeling is to be distributed among the faces involved.

A person may be said to *have*, or *be in*, or *maintain* face when the line he effectively takes presents an image of him that is internally consistent, that is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants, and that is confirmed by evidence conveyed through impersonal agencies in the situation. At such times the person’s face clearly is something that is not lodged in or on his body, but rather something that is diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter and becomes manifest only when these events are read and interpreted for the appraisals expressed in them.

The line maintained by and for a person during contact with others tends to be of a legitimate institutionalized kind. During a contact of a particular type, an interactant of known or visible attributes can expect to be sustained in a particular face and can feel that it is morally proper that this should be so. Given his attributes and the conventionalized nature of the encounter, he will find a small choice of lines will be open to him and a small choice of faces will be waiting for him. Further, on the basis of a few known attributes, he is given the responsibility of possessing a vast number of others. His co-participants are not likely to be conscious of the character of many of these attributes until he acts perceptibly in such a way as to discredit his possession of them; then everyone becomes conscious of these attributes and assumes that he willfully gave a false impression of possessing them.

Thus, while concern for face focuses the attention of the person on the current activity, he must, to maintain face in this activity, take into consideration his place in the social world beyond it. A person who can maintain face in the current situation is someone who has abstained from certain actions in the past that would have been difficult to face up to later. In addition, he fears loss of face now partly because the others may take this as a sign that consideration for his feelings need not be shown in the future. There is nevertheless a limitation to this interdependence between the current situation and the wider social world: an encounter with people whom he will not have dealings with



again leaves him free to take a high line that the future will discredit, or free to suffer humiliations that would make future dealing with them an embarrassing thing to have to face.

A person may be said to *be in wrong face* when information is brought forth in some way about his social worth which cannot be integrated, even with effort, into the line that is being sustained for him. A person may be said to *be out of face* when he participates in a contact with others without having ready a line of the kind participants in such situations are expected to take. The intent of many pranks is to lead a person into showing a wrong face or no face, but there will also be serious occasions, of course, when he will find himself expressively out of touch with the situation.

When a person senses that he is in face, he typically responds with feelings of confidence and assurance. Firm in the line he is taking, he feels that he can hold his head up and openly present himself to others. He feels some security and some relief—as he also can when the others feel he is in wrong face but successfully hide these feelings from him.

When a person is in wrong face or out of face, expressive events are being contributed to the encounter which cannot be readily woven into the expressive fabric of the occasion. Should he sense that he is in wrong face or out of face, he is likely to feel ashamed and inferior because of what has happened to the activity on his account and because of what may happen to his reputation as a participant. Further, he may feel bad because he had relied upon the encounter to support an image of self to which he has become emotionally attached and which he now finds threatened. Felt lack of judgmental support from the encounter may take him aback, confuse him, and momentarily incapacitate him as an interactant. His manner and bearing may falter, collapse, and crumble. He may become embarrassed and chagrined; he may become shamefaced. The feeling, whether warranted or not, that he is perceived in a flustered state by others, and that he is presenting no usable line, may add further injuries to his feelings, just as his change from being

in wrong face or out of face to being shamefaced can add further disorder to the expressive organization of the situation. Following common usage, I shall employ the term *poise* to refer to the capacity to suppress and conceal any tendency to become shamefaced during encounters with others.

In our Anglo-American society, as in some others, the phrase “to lose face” seems to mean to be in wrong face, to be out of face, or to be shamefaced. The phrase “to save one’s face” appears to refer to the process by which the person sustains an impression for others that he has not lost face. . . .

As an aspect of the social code of any social circle, one may expect to find an understanding as to how far a person should go to save his face. Once he takes on a self-image expressed through face, he will be expected to live up to it. In different ways in different societies, he will be required to show self-respect, abjuring certain actions because they are above or beneath him, while forcing himself to perform others, even though they cost him dearly. By entering a situation in which he is given a face to maintain, a person takes on the responsibility of standing guard over the flow of events as they pass before him. He must ensure that a particular *expressive order* is sustained—an order that regulates the flow of events, large or small, so that anything that appears to be expressed by them will be consistent with his face. When a person manifests these compunctions primarily from duty to himself, one speaks in our society of pride; when he does so because of duty to wider social units, and receives support from these units in doing so, one speaks of honor. When these compunctions have to do with postural things, with expressive events derived from the way in which the person handles his body, his emotions, and the things with which he has physical contact, one speaks of dignity, this being an aspect of expressive control that is always praised and never studied. In any case, while his social face can be his most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure, it is only on loan to him from society; it will be withdrawn,



unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it. Approved attributes and their relation to face make of every man his own jailer; this is a fundamental social constraint, even though each man may like his cell.

Just as the member of any group is expected to have self-respect, so also he is expected to sustain a standard of considerateness; he is expected to go to certain lengths to save the feelings and the face of others present, and he is expected to do this willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification with the others and with their feelings. In consequence, he is disinclined to witness the defacement of others. The person who can witness another's humiliation and unfeelingly retain a cool countenance himself is said in our society to be "heartless," just as he who can unfeelingly participate in his own defacement is thought to be "shameless."

The combined effect of the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness is that the person tends to conduct himself during an encounter so as to maintain both his own face and the face of the other participants. This means that the line taken by each participant is usually allowed to prevail, and each participant is allowed to carry off the role he appears to have chosen for himself. A state where everyone temporarily accepts everyone else's line is established. This kind of mutual acceptance seems to be a basic structural feature of interaction, especially the interaction of face-to-face talk. It is typically a "working" acceptance, not a "real" one, since it tends to be based not on agreement of candidly expressed heart-felt evaluations, but upon a willingness to give temporary lip service to judgments with which the participants do not really agree.

The mutual acceptance of lines has an important conservative effect upon encounters. Once the person initially presents a line, he and the others tend to build their later responses upon it, and in a sense, become stuck with it. Should the person radically alter his line, or should it become discredited, then confusion results, for the participants

will have prepared and committed themselves for actions that are now unsuitable. . . .

By *face-work* I mean to designate the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face. Face-work serves to counteract "incidents"—that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face. Thus, poise is one important type of face-work, for through poise the person controls his embarrassment and hence the embarrassment that he and others might have over his embarrassment. Whether or not the full consequences of face-saving actions are known to the person who employs them, they often become habitual and standardized practices; they are like traditional plays in a game or traditional steps in a dance. Each person, subculture, and society seems to have its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices. It is to this repertoire that people partly refer when they ask what a person or culture is "really" like. And yet the particular set of practices stressed by particular persons or groups seems to be drawn from a single logically coherent framework of possible practices. It is as if face, by its very nature, can be saved only in a certain number of ways, and as if each social grouping must make its selections from this single matrix of possibilities.

The members of every social circle may be expected to have some knowledge of face-work and some experience in its use. In our society, this kind of capacity is sometimes called tact, *savoir-faire*, diplomacy, or social skill. Variation in social skill pertains more to the efficacy of face-work than to the frequency of its application, for almost all acts involving others are modified, prescriptively or proscriptively, by considerations of face. If a person is to employ his repertoire of face-saving practices, obviously he must first become aware of the interpretation that others may have placed upon his acts and the interpretation that he ought perhaps to place upon theirs. In other words, he must exercise perceptiveness. But even if he is properly alive to symbolically conveyed judgments and is socially skilled, he must yet be willing to exercise



his perceptiveness and his skill; he must, in short, be prideful and considerate. Admittedly, of course, the possession of perceptiveness and social skill so often leads to their application in our society that terms such as politeness or tact fail to distinguish between the inclination to exercise such capacities and the capacities themselves.

I have already said that the person will have two points of view—a defensive orientation toward saving his own face and a protective orientation toward saving the others' face. Some practices will be primarily defensive and others primarily protective, although in general, one may expect these two perspectives to be taken at the same time. In trying to save the face of others, the person must choose a tack that will not lead to loss of his own; in trying to save his own face, he must consider the loss of face that his action may entail for others.

In many societies, there is a tendency to distinguish three levels of responsibility that a person may have for a threat to face that his actions have created. First, he may appear to have acted innocently; his offense seems to be unintended and unwitting, and those who perceive his act can feel that he would have attempted to avoid it had he foreseen its offensive consequences. In our society, one calls such threats to face *faux pas*, *gaffes*, *boners*, or *bricks*. Secondly, the offending person may appear to have acted maliciously and spitefully, with the intention of causing open insult. Thirdly, there are incidental offenses; these arise as an unplanned but sometimes anticipated by-product of action—action the offender performs in spite of its offensive consequences, although not out of spite. From the point of view of a particular participant, these three types of threat can be introduced by the participant himself against his own face, by himself against the face of the others, by the others against their own face, or by the others against himself. Thus, the person may find himself in many different relations to a threat to face. If he is to handle himself and others well in all contingencies, he will have to have a repertoire of face-saving practices for each of these possible relations to threat.

## The Basic Kinds of Face-Work

### The Avoidance Process

The surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face is to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur. In all societies, one can observe this in the avoidance relationship and in the tendency for certain delicate transactions to be conducted by go-betweens. Similarly, in many societies, members know the value of voluntarily making a gracious withdrawal before an anticipated threat to face has had a chance to occur.

Once the person does chance an encounter, other kinds of avoidance practices come into play. As defensive measures, he keeps off topics and away from activities that would lead to the expression of information that is inconsistent with the line he is maintaining. At opportune moments he will change the topic of conversation or the direction of activity. He will often present initially a front of diffidence and composure, suppressing any show of feeling, until he has found out what kind of line the others will be ready to support for him. Any claims regarding self may be made with belittling modesty, with strong qualifications, or with a note of unseriousness; by hedging in these ways, he will have prepared a self for himself that will not be discredited by exposure, personal failure, or the unanticipated acts of others. And if he does not hedge his claims about self, he will at least attempt to be realistic about them, knowing that otherwise events may discredit him and make him lose face.

Certain protective maneuvers are as common as these defensive ones. The person shows respect and politeness, making sure to extend to others any ceremonial treatment that might be their due. He employs discretion; he leaves unstated facts that might implicitly or explicitly contradict and embarrass the positive claims made by others. He employs circumlocutions and deceptions, phrasing his replies with careful ambiguity, so that the others' face is preserved even if their welfare is not. He employs courtesies, making slight modifications



of his demands on or appraisals of the others, so that they will be able to define the situation as one in which their self-respect is not threatened. In making a belittling demand upon the others, or in imputing uncomplimentary attributes to them, he may employ a joking manner, allowing them to take the lie that they are good sports, able to relax from their ordinary standards of pride and honor. And before engaging in a potentially offensive act, he may provide explanations as to why the others ought not to be affronted by it. For example, if he knows that it will be necessary to withdraw from the encounter before it has terminated, he may tell the others in advance that it is necessary for him to leave, so that they will have faces that are prepared for it. But neutralizing the potentially offensive act need not be done verbally; he may wait for a propitious moment or natural break—for example, in conversation, a momentary lull when no one speaker can be affronted—and then leave, in this way using the context instead of his words as a guarantee of inoffensiveness.

When a person fails to prevent an incident, he can still attempt to maintain the fiction that no threat to face has occurred. The most blatant example of this is found where the person acts as if an event that contains a threatening expression has not occurred at all. He may apply this studied non-observance to his own acts—as when he does not by any outward sign admit that his stomach is rumbling—or to the acts of others, as when he does not “see” that another has stumbled. Social life in mental hospitals owes much to this process; patients employ it in regard to their own peculiarities, and visitors employ it, often with tenuous desperation, in regard to patients. In general, tactful blindness of this kind is applied only to events that, if perceived at all, could be perceived and interpreted only as threats to face.

A more important, less spectacular kind of tactful overlooking is practiced when a person openly acknowledges an incident as an event that has occurred, but not as an event that contains a threatening expression. If he is not the one who is

responsible for the incident, then his blindness will have to be supported by his forbearance; if he is the doer of the threatening deed, then his blindness will have to be supported by his willingness to seek a way of dealing with the matter, which leaves him dangerously dependent upon the cooperative forbearance of the others.

Another kind of avoidance occurs when a person loses control of his expressions during an encounter. At such times he may try not so much to overlook the incident as to hide or conceal his activity in some way, thus making it possible for the others to avoid some of the difficulties created by a participant who has not maintained face. Correspondingly, when a person is caught out of face because he had not expected to be thrust into interaction, or because strong feelings have disrupted his expressive mask, the others may protectively turn away from him or his activity for a moment, to give him time to assemble himself.

### The Corrective Process

When the participants in an undertaking or encounter fail to prevent the occurrence of an event that is expressively incompatible with the judgments of social worth that are being maintained, and when the event is of the kind that is difficult to overlook, then the participants are likely to give it accredited status as an incident—to ratify it as a threat that deserves direct official attention—and to proceed to try to correct for its effects. At this point, one or more participants find themselves in an established state of ritual disequilibrium or disgrace, and an attempt must be made to re-establish a satisfactory ritual state for them. I use the term *ritual* because I am dealing with acts through whose symbolic component the actor shows how worthy he is of respect or how worthy he feels others are of it. The imagery of equilibrium is apt here, because the length and intensity of the corrective effort is nicely adapted to the persistence and intensity of the threat. One's face, then, is a sacred thing, and the expressive order required to sustain it is, therefore, a ritual one.



The sequence of acts set in motion by an acknowledged threat to face, and terminating in the re-establishment of ritual equilibrium, I shall call an *interchange*. Defining a message or move as everything conveyed by an actor during a turn at taking action, one can say that an interchange will involve two or more moves and two or more participants. Obvious examples in our society may be found in the sequence of "Excuse me" and "Certainly" and in the exchange of presents or visits. The interchange seems to be a basic concrete unit of social activity and provides one natural empirical way to study interaction of all kinds. Face-saving practices can be usefully classified according to their position in the natural sequence of moves that comprise this unit. Aside from the event which introduces the need for a corrective interchange, four classic moves seem to be involved.

There is, first, the challenge, by which participants take on the responsibility of calling attention to the misconduct; by implication, they suggest that the threatened claims are to stand firm and that the threatening event itself will have to be brought back into line.

The second move consists of the offering, whereby a participant, typically the offender, is given a chance to correct for the offense and re-establish the expressive order. Some classic ways of making this move are available. On the one hand, an attempt can be made to show that what admittedly appeared to be a threatening expression is really a meaningless event, or an unintentional act, or a joke not meant to be taken seriously, or an unavoidable, "understandable" product of extenuating circumstances. On the other hand, the meaning of the event may be granted and effort concentrated on the creator of it. Information may be provided to show that the creator was under the influence of something and not himself, or that he was under the command of somebody else and not acting for himself. When a person claims that an act was meant in jest, he may go on and claim that the self that seemed to lie behind the act was also projected as a joke. When a person suddenly finds

that he has demonstrably failed in capacities that the others assumed him to have and to claim for himself—such as the capacity to spell, to perform minor tasks, to talk without malapropisms, and so on—he may quickly add, in a serious or unserious way, that he claims these incapacities as part of his self. The meaning of the threatening incident thus stands, but it can now be incorporated smoothly into the flow of expressive events.

As a supplement to or substitute for the strategy of redefining the offensive act or himself, the offender can follow two other procedures: he can provide compensations to the injured—when it is not his own face that he has threatened; or he can provide punishment, penance, and expiation for himself. These are important moves or phases in the ritual interchange. Even though the offender may fail to prove his innocence, he can suggest through these means that he is now a renewed person, a person who has paid for his sin against the expressive order and is once more to be trusted in the judgmental scene. Further, he can show that he does not treat the feelings of the others lightly, and that, if their feelings have been injured by him, however innocently, he is prepared to pay a price for his action. Thus, he assures the others that they can accept his explanations without this acceptance constituting a sign of weakness and a lack of pride on their part. Also, by his treatment of himself, by his self-castigation, he shows that he is clearly aware of the kind of crime he would have committed had the incident been what it first appeared to be, and that he knows the kind of punishment that ought to be accorded to one who would commit such a crime. The suspected person thus shows that he is thoroughly capable of taking the role of the others toward his own activity, that he can still be used as a responsible participant in the ritual process, and that the rules of conduct which he appears to have broken are still sacred, real, and unweakened. An offensive act may arouse anxiety about the ritual code; the offender allays this anxiety by showing that both the code and he as an upholder of it are still in working order.



After the challenge and the offering have been made, the third move can occur; the persons to whom the offering is made can accept it as a satisfactory means of re-establishing the expressive order and the faces supported by this order. Only then can the offender cease the major part of his ritual offering.

In the terminal move of the interchange, the forgiven person conveys a sign of gratitude to those who have given him the indulgence of forgiveness.

The phases of the corrective process—challenge, offering, acceptance, and thanks—provide a model for interpersonal ritual behavior, but a model that may be departed from in significant ways. For example, the offended parties may give the offender a chance to initiate the offering on his own before a challenge is made and before they ratify the offense as an incident. This is a common courtesy, extended on the assumption that the recipient will introduce a self-challenge. Further, when the offended persons accept the corrective offering, the offender may suspect that this has been grudgingly done from tact, and so he may volunteer additional corrective offerings, not allowing the matter to rest until he has received a second or third acceptance of his repeated apology. Or the offended persons may tactfully take over the role of the offender and volunteer excuses for him that will, perforce, be acceptable to the offended persons.

An important departure from the standard corrective cycle occurs when a challenged offender patently refuses to heed the warning and continues with his offending behavior, instead of setting the activity to rights. This move shifts the play back to the challengers. If they countenance the refusal to meet their demands, then it will be plain that their challenge was a bluff and that the bluff has been called. This is an untenable position; a face for themselves cannot be derived from it, and they are left to bluster. To avoid this fate, some classic moves are open to them. For instance, they can resort to tactless, violent retaliation, destroying either themselves or the person

who had refused to heed their warning. Or they can withdraw from the undertaking in a visible huff—righteously indignant, outraged, but confident of ultimate vindication. Both tactics provide a way of denying the offender his status as an interactant, and hence denying the reality of the offensive judgment he has made. Both strategies are ways of salvaging face, but for all concerned the costs are usually high. It is partly to forestall such scenes that an offender is usually quick to offer apologies; he does not want the affronted persons to trap themselves into the obligation to resort to desperate measures.

It is plain that emotions play a part in these cycles of response, as when anguish is expressed because of what one has done to another's face, or anger because of what has been done to one's own. I want to stress that these emotions function as moves, and fit so precisely into the logic of the ritual game that it would seem difficult to understand them without it. In fact, spontaneously expressed feelings are likely to fit into the formal pattern of the ritual interchange more elegantly than consciously designed ones.

### **Making Points—The Aggressive Use of Face-Work**

Every face-saving practice which is allowed to neutralize a particular threat opens up the possibility that the threat will be willfully introduced for what can be safely gained by it. If a person knows that this modesty will be answered by others' praise of him, he can fish for compliments. If his own appraisal of self will be checked against incidental events, then he can arrange for favorable incidental events to appear. If others are prepared to overlook an affront to them and act forbearingly, or to accept apologies, then he can rely on this as a basis for safely offending them. He can attempt by sudden withdrawal to force the others into a ritually unsatisfactory state, leaving them to flounder in an interchange that cannot readily be completed. Finally, at some expense to himself, he can arrange for the others to hurt his feelings, thus



forcing them to feel guilt, remorse, and sustained ritual disequilibrium.

When a person treats face-work not as something he need be prepared to perform, but rather as something that others can be counted on to perform or to accept, then an encounter or an undertaking becomes less a scene of mutual considerateness than an arena in which a contest or match is held. The purpose of the game is to preserve everyone's line from an inexcusable contradiction, while scoring as many points as possible against one's adversaries and making as many gains as possible for oneself. An audience to the struggle is almost a necessity. The general method is for the person to introduce favorable facts about himself and unfavorable facts about the others in such a way that the only reply the others will be able to think up will be one that terminates the interchange in a grumble, a meager excuse, a face-saving I-can-take-a-joke laugh, or an empty stereotyped comeback of the "Oh yeah?" or "That's what you think" variety. The losers in such cases will have to cut their losses, tacitly grant the loss of a point, and attempt to do better in the next interchange. . . .

In aggressive interchanges, the winner not only succeeds in introducing information favorable to himself and unfavorable to the others, but also demonstrates that as interactant he can handle himself better than his adversaries. Evidence of this capacity is often more important than all the other information the person conveys in the interchange, so that the introduction of a "crack" in verbal interaction tends to imply that the initiator is better at footwork than those who must suffer his remarks. However, if they succeed in making a successful parry of the thrust and then a successful riposte, the instigator of the play must not only face the disparagement with which the others have answered him but also accept the fact that his assumption of superiority in footwork has proven false. He is made to look foolish; he loses face. Hence, it is always a gamble to "make a remark." The tables can be turned and the aggressor can lose

more than he could have gained had his move won the point. . . .

### Cooperation in Face-Work

Since each participant in an undertaking is concerned, albeit for differing reasons, with saving his own face and the face of the others, then tacit cooperation will naturally arise so that the participants together can attain their shared but differently motivated objectives.

One common type of tacit cooperation in face-saving is the tact exerted in regard to face-work itself. The person not only defends his own face and protects the face of the others, but also acts so as to make it possible and even easy for the others to employ face-work for themselves and him. He helps them to help themselves and him. Social etiquette, for example, warns men against asking for New Year's Eve dates too early in the season, lest the girl find it difficult to provide a gentle excuse for refusing. This second-order tact can be further illustrated by the wide-spread practice of negative-attribute etiquette. The person who has an unapparent negatively valued attribute often finds it expedient to begin an encounter with an unobtrusive admission of his failing, especially with persons who are uninformed about him. The others are thus warned in advance against making disparaging remarks about his kind of person and are saved from the contradiction of acting in a friendly fashion to a person toward whom they are unwittingly being hostile. This strategy also prevents the others from automatically making assumptions about him which place him in a false position and saves him from painful forbearance or embarrassing remonstrances.

Tact, in regard to face-work, often relies for its operation on a tacit agreement to do business through the language of hint—the language of innuendo, ambiguities, well-placed pauses, carefully worded jokes, and so on. The rule regarding this unofficial kind of communication is that the sender ought not to act as if he had officially conveyed the message he has hinted at, while the recipients have



the right and the obligation to act as if they have not officially received the message contained in the hint. Hinted communication, then, is deniable communication; it need not be faced up to. It provides a means by which the person can be warned that his current line or the current situation is leading to loss of face, without this warning itself becoming an incident.

Another form of tacit cooperation, and one that seems to be much used in many societies, is reciprocal self-denial. Often the person does not have a clear idea of what would be a just or acceptable apportionment of judgments during the occasion, and so he voluntarily deprives or depreciates himself while indulging and complimenting the others, in both cases carrying the judgments safely past what is likely to be just. The favorable judgments about himself he allows to come from others; the unfavorable judgments of himself are his own contributions.

This "after you, Alphonse" technique works, of course, because in depriving himself, he can reliably anticipate that the others will compliment or indulge him. Whatever allocation of favors is eventually established, all participants are first given a chance to show that they are not bound or constrained by their own desires and expectations, that they have a properly modest view of themselves, and that they can be counted upon to support the ritual code. . . .

A person's performance of face-work, extended by his tacit agreement to help others perform theirs, represents his willingness to abide by the ground rules of social interaction. Here is the hallmark of his socialization as an interactant. If he and the others were not socialized in this way, interaction in most societies and most situations would be a much more hazardous thing for feelings and faces. The person would find it impractical to be oriented to symbolically conveyed appraisals of social worth, or to be possessed of feelings—that is, it would be impractical for him to be a ritually delicate object. . . . It is no wonder that trouble is

caused by a person who cannot be relied upon to play the face-saving game. . . .

### Conclusion

Throughout this paper it has been implied that underneath their differences in culture, people everywhere are the same. If persons have a universal human nature, they themselves are not to be looked to for an explanation of it. One must look rather to the fact that societies everywhere, if they are to be societies, must mobilize their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters. One way of mobilizing the individual for this purpose is through ritual: he is taught to be perceptive; to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face; to have pride, honor, and dignity; to have considerateness; to have tact and a certain amount of poise. These are some of the elements of behavior which must be built into the person, if practical use is to be made of him as an interactant, and it is these elements that are referred to in part when one speaks of universal human nature.

Universal human nature is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without. These rules, when followed, determine the evaluation he will make of himself and of his fellow-participants in the encounter, the distribution of his feelings, and the kinds of practices he will employ to maintain a specified and obligatory kind of ritual equilibrium. The general capacity to be bound by moral rules may well belong to the individual, but the particular set of rules which transforms him into a human being derives from requirements established in the ritual organization of social encounters. . . .

### Reflective Questions

1. What is a line? What is face, and where does it come from? What types of encounters produce feelings of goodness? Hurt? What is saving face? Why do we fear losing face? How do we save the face of others?





2. What is face-work? Why do we avoid particular encounters? How else do we avoid threats to face? How do we correct disgracing encounters? Why do we engage in this remedial face-work? What happens when we successfully neutralize a threat?
3. Sometimes we offend people in ways that are minimally threatening to our own face. Why? How do we cooperate in helping others save face?
4. Search for comedians Andy and Hamish "ghosting" on your web browser. (You may watch it here: [www](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peAtB_dFUho)

[.youtube.com/watch?v=peAtB\\_dFUho](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peAtB_dFUho).) What is ghosting? Does ghosting threaten face? Whose? Why? How do they pick their targets? What are the reactions of passersby? When do Hamish and Andy engage in corrective action? What do they do? What do they say? What mannerisms do they use? Whose face are they protecting? What would happen if they didn't engage in corrective action? Why is ghosting funny? What role do lines, face-work, and rituals play in humor?





## The Interaction Order of Public Bathrooms

SPENCER E. CAHILL

*This selection illustrates the dramatic and ritual character of everyday social life that Goffman identified with the example of routine behavior in public bathrooms. From Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, bathrooms are backstage regions where individuals can temporarily retire from their front-stage performances. However, public bathrooms do not insulate individuals from potential audiences. When not concealed in toilet stalls, they must be ready to perform and to uphold what Goffman called "the interaction order." Yet, individuals in public bathrooms routinely engage in acts that are inconsistent with their front-stage performances and undermine the "sacred" face they claim through those performances. Thus, public bathrooms are scenes of many socially delicate situations that reveal just how loyal we are to the commonly understood but unspoken rules that govern everyday social interaction.*

*First, this selection illustrates that much behavior in public bathrooms consists of what Goffman called "interpersonal rituals." Individuals show respect for one another by honoring one another's right to be left alone and the turn order of queues. They show respect for their relationships with others by acknowledging those with whom they are previously acquainted. Other ritual conduct in public bathrooms addresses the socially delicate situations that occur within them. For example, men using adjacent urinals do*

*not glance at one another and then look away as they might under other circumstances but keep their eyes glued to the wall directly in front of them. Other ritual conduct counteracts the profaning implications of the acts for which public bathrooms are explicitly designed.*

*Second, this selection illustrates the variety of backstage behaviors that routinely occur in public bathrooms. In addition to the acts for which they are explicitly designed, individuals retreat to bathrooms to inspect and repair their front-stage appearance and costumes or "persona fronts." They retreat to bathrooms when overcome by emotion. And, groups who are acting as an ensemble or "performance team" retreat to bathrooms to boost team morale, rehearse lines, and give one another direction.*

*Both forms of routine behavior in public bathrooms, ritual and backstage, reveal many of the usually unrecognized standards that govern everyday social interaction and our usually unrecognized commitment to them. Backstage behavior reveals, by way of contrast, the behavioral standards that govern our performances out front. And, our ritual conduct in public bathrooms demonstrates just how committed we are to upholding the expressive order that sustains the "sacredness" of our own and others' "face." The usually unnoticed but exquisite orderliness of everyday social interaction clearly does not stop at the bathroom door.*

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[S]ome years ago the anthropologist Horace Miner (1955) suggested, with tongue planted firmly in cheek, that many of the rituals that behaviorally express and sustain the central values of our culture occur in bathrooms. Whether Miner realized it or not . . . there was more to this thesis than his humorous interpretation of bathroom rituals suggests. As Erving Goffman (1959: 112–113) once observed, the vital secrets of our public shows are often visible in those settings that serve as backstage regions relative to our public performances:

[I]t is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. . . . Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character.

Clearly, bathrooms or, as they are often revealingly called, restrooms, are such backstage regions. By implication, therefore, systematic study of bathroom behavior may yield valuable insights into the character and requirements of our routine public performances. . . .

This study is . . . concerned with routine bathroom behavior. Over a nine-month period, five student research assistants and I spent over one hundred hours observing behavior in the bathrooms of such public establishments as shopping malls, student centers on college campuses, and restaurants and bars at various locations in the Northeastern United States. These observations were recorded in field notes and provide the empirical basis for the following analysis.

### The Performance Regions of Public Bathrooms

Needless to say, one of the behaviors for which bathrooms are explicitly designed is defecation. In our society, as Goffman (1959: 121) observed, “defecation involves an individual in activity which is defined as inconsistent with the cleanliness and purity standards” that govern our public performances.

Such activity also causes the individual to disarrange his clothing and to “go out of play,” that is,

to drop from his face the expressive mask that he employs in face-to-face interaction. At the same time it becomes difficult for him to reassemble his personal front should the need to enter into interaction occur.

When engaged in the act of defecation, therefore, individuals seek to insulate themselves from potential audiences in order to avoid discrediting the expressive masks that they publicly employ. . . .

In an apparent attempt to provide such privacy, toilets in many public bathrooms are surrounded by partially walled cubicles with doors that can be secured against potential intrusions. Public bathrooms that do not provide individuals this protection from potential audiences are seldom used for the purpose of defecation. In the course of our research, for example, we never observed an individual using an unenclosed toilet for this purpose. If a bathroom contained both enclosed and unenclosed toilets . . . individuals ignored the unenclosed toilets even when queues had formed outside of the enclosed toilets. In a sense, therefore, the cubicles that typically surround toilets in public bathrooms, commonly called stalls, physically divide such bathrooms into two distinct performance regions.

Indeed, Goffman (1971: 32) has used the term “stall” to refer to any “well-bounded space to which individuals lay temporary claim, possession being on an all-or-nothing basis.” . . . [A] toilet stall is clearly a member of this sociological family of ecological arrangements. Sociologically speaking, however, it is not physical boundaries, per se, that define a space as a stall but the behavioral regard given such boundaries. For example, individuals who open or attempt to open the door of an occupied toilet stall typically provide a remedy for this act, in most cases a brief apology such as “Whoops” or “Sorry.” By offering such a remedy, the offending individual implicitly defines the attempted intrusion as a [violation] and, thereby, affirms his or her belief in a rule that prohibits such intrusions (Goffman 1971: 113). In this sense,



toilet stalls provide occupying individuals not only physical protection against potential audiences but normative protection as well.

In order to receive this protection, however, occupying individuals must clearly inform others of their claim to such a stall. Although individuals sometimes lean down and look under doors of toilet stalls for feet, they typically expect occupying individuals to mark their claim to a toilet stall by securely closing the door. On one occasion, a middle-aged woman began to push open the unlocked door of a toilet stall. Upon discovering that the stall was occupied, she immediately said, "I'm sorry," and closed the door. When a young woman emerged from the stall a couple minutes later, the older woman apologized once again but pointed out that "the door was open." The young woman responded, "it's okay," thereby minimizing the offense and perhaps acknowledging a degree of culpability on her part.

As is the case with many physical barriers to perception (Goffman 1963: 152), the walls and doors of toilet stalls are also treated as if they cut off more communication than they actually do. Under most circumstances, the walls and doors of toilet stalls are treated as if they were barriers to conversation. Although acquainted individuals may sometimes carry on a conversation through the walls of a toilet stall if they believe the bathroom is not otherwise occupied, they seldom do so if they are aware that others are present. Moreover, individuals often attempt to ignore offensive sounds and smells that emanate from occupied toilet stalls, even though the exercise of such "tactful blindness" (Goffman 1955: 219) is sometimes a demanding task. In any case, the walls and doors of toilet stalls provide public actors with both physical and normative shields behind which they can perform potentially discrediting acts.

Toilet stalls in public bathrooms are, therefore, publicly accessible yet private backstage regions. Although same-sexed clients of a public establishment may lay claim to any unoccupied toilet stall in the bathroom designated for use by persons of

their sex, once such a claim is laid, once the door to the stall is closed, it is transformed into the occupying individual's private, albeit temporary, retreat from the demands of public life. While occupying the stall, that individual can engage in a variety of potentially discrediting acts with impunity.

When not concealed behind the protective cover of a toilet stall, however, occupants of public bathrooms may be observed by others. . . . Same-sexed clients of a public establishment can enter and exit at will the bathroom designated for their use, and it may be simultaneously occupied by as many individuals as its physical dimensions allow. By implication, occupants of public bathrooms must either perform or be ready to perform for an audience. As a result, the behavior that routinely occurs in the "open region" of a public bathroom, that area that is not enclosed by toilet stalls, resembles, in many important respects, the behavior that routinely occurs in other public settings.

### The Ritual of Public Bathrooms

As Goffman (1971) convincingly argued, much of this behavior can best be described as "interpersonal rituals." Emile Durkheim (1965), in his [classic] analysis of religion, defined a ritual as a perfunctory, conventionalized act which expresses respect and regard for some object of "ultimate value." . . . Drawing inspiration from Durkheim, Goffman (1971: 63) pointed out that despite the increasing secularization of our society there remain

brief rituals one individual performs for and to another, attesting to civility and good will on the performer's part and to the recipient's possession of a small patrimony of sacredness.

Still borrowing from Durkheim . . . Goffman (1971: 62) divided these interpersonal rituals into two classes: positive and negative.

According to Durkheim, negative rituals express respect and regard for objects of ultimate value by protecting them from profanation. According to Goffman (1971: 62), negative interpersonal rituals involve the behavioral honoring of



the scared individual's right to private "preserves" and "to be let alone." As previously noted, for example, individuals typically refrain from physically, conversationally, or visually intruding on an occupied toilet stall. In doing so, they implicitly honor the occupying individual's right to be let alone and in this respect perform a negative interpersonal ritual.

Similarly, the queues that typically form in public bathrooms when the demand for sinks, urinals, and toilet stalls exceeds the available supply are also products of individuals' mutual performance of negative interpersonal rituals. Individuals typically honor one another's right to the turn claimed by taking up a position in such a queue, even when "creature releases" (Goffman 1963: 69) threaten to break through their self-control. Young children provide an occasional exception, sometimes ignoring the turn-order of such queues. Yet even then the child's caretaker typically requests, on the child's behalf, the permission of those waiting in the queue. Between performances at a music festival, for example, a preschool-age girl and her mother were observed rapidly walking toward the entrance to a women's bathroom out of which a queue extended for several yards down a nearby sidewalk. As they walked past those waiting in the queue, the mother repeatedly asked, "Do you mind? She really has to go."

However, the interpersonal rituals that routinely occur in the open region of public bathrooms are not limited to negative ones. If individuals possess a small patrimony of sacredness, then, as Durkheim (1974: 37) noted, "the greatest good is in communion" with such sacred objects. When previously acquainted individuals come into contact with one another, therefore, they typically perform conventionalized acts, positive interpersonal rituals, that express respect and regard for their previous communion with one another. In a sense, negative and positive interpersonal rituals are two sides of the same expressive coin. Whereas negative interpersonal rituals symbolically protect individuals from profanation by others, positive interpersonal

rituals symbolically cleanse communion between individuals of its potentially defiling implications. Although a positive interpersonal ritual may consist of no more than a brief exchange of greetings, failure to at least acknowledge one's previous communion with another is, in effect, to express disregard for the relationship and, by implication, the other individual's small patrimony of sacredness (Goffman 1971: 62–94).

Even when previously acquainted individuals come into contact with one another in a public bathroom, therefore, they typically acknowledge their prior relationship. In fact, the performance of such positive interpersonal rituals sometimes interfered with the conduct of our research. On one occasion, for example, a member of the research team was in the open region of an otherwise unoccupied men's bathroom. While he was writing some notes about an incident that had just occurred, an acquaintance entered.

A: Hey! (walks to the urinal and unzips his pants) Nothing like pissin.

O: Yup.

A: Whida hell ya doin? (walks over to a sink and washes hands)

O: Writing.

A: Heh, heh, yea. About people pissin . . . That's for you.

O: Yup.

A: Take care.

O: Mmm. Huh.

As this incident illustrates, individuals must be prepared to perform positive interpersonal rituals when in the open region of public bathrooms, especially those in public establishments with a relatively stable clientele. Whereas some of these may consist of no more than a brief exchange of smiles, others may involve lengthy conversations that reaffirm the participants' shared biography.

In contrast, when unacquainted individuals come into contact with one another in the open regions of public bathrooms, they typically perform a brief, negative interpersonal ritual that Goffman



(1963: 84) termed "civil inattention." In its canonical form,

one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present . . . while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design.

Through this brief pattern of visual interaction, individuals both acknowledge one another's presence and, immediately thereafter, one another's right to be let alone.

A variation on the canonical form of civil attention is also commonly performed in the open region of public bathrooms, most often by men using adjacent urinals. Although masculine clothing permits males to urinate without noticeably disturbing their clothed appearance, they must still partially expose their external genitalia in order to do so. Clearly, the standards of modesty that govern public behavior prohibit even such limited exposure of the external genitalia. Although the sides of some urinals and the urinating individual's back provide partial barriers to perception, they do not provide protection against the glances of someone occupying an adjacent urinal. In our society, however, "when bodies are naked, glances are clothed" (Goffman 1971: 46). What men typically give one another when using adjacent urinals is not, therefore, civil inattention but "non-person treatment" (Goffman 1963: 83–84): that is, they treat one another as if they were part of the setting's physical equipment, as "objects not worthy of a glance." When circumstances allow, of course, unacquainted males typically avoid occupying adjacent urinals and, thereby, this ritually delicate situation.

It is not uncommon, however, for previously acquainted males to engage in conversation while using adjacent urinals. For example, the following interaction was observed in the bathroom of a restaurant.

A middle-aged man is standing at one of two urinals. Another middle-aged man enters the bathroom and, as he approaches the available urinal,

greet the first man by name. The first man quickly casts a side-long glance at the second and returns the greeting. He then asks the second man about his "new granddaughter," and they continue to talk about grandchildren until one of them zips up his pants and walks over to a sink. Throughout the conversation, neither man turned his head so as to look at the other.

As this example illustrates, urinal conversations are often characterized by a lack of visual interaction between the participants. Instead of looking at one another while listening . . . participants in such conversations typically fix their gaze on the wall immediately in front of them, an intriguing combination of the constituent elements of positive and negative interpersonal rituals. Although ritually celebrating their prior communion with one another, they also visually honor one another's right to privacy.

Due to the particular profanations and threats of profanations that characterize public bathrooms, moreover, a number of variations on these general patterns also commonly occur. In our society, as Goffman (1971: 41) observed, bodily excreta are considered "agencies of defilement." Although supported by germ theory, this view involves somewhat more than a concern for hygiene. Once such substances as urine, fecal matter, menstrual discharge and flatus leave individuals' bodies, they acquire the power to profane even though they may not have the power to infect. In any case, many of the activities in which individuals engage when in bathrooms are considered both self-profaning and potentially profaning to others. As a result, a variety of ritually delicate situations often arise in public bathrooms.

For example, after using urinals and toilets, individuals' hands are considered contaminated and, consequently, a source of contamination to others. In order to demonstrate both self-respect and respect for those with whom they might come into contact, individuals are expected to and often do wash their hands after using urinals and toilets.



Sinks for this purpose are typically located in the open region of public bathrooms, allowing others to witness the performance of this restorative ritual. Sometimes, however, public bathrooms are not adequately equipped for this purpose. Most commonly, towel dispensers are empty or broken. Although individuals sometimes do not discover this situation until after they have already washed their hands, they often glance at towel dispensers as they walk from urinals and toilet stalls to sinks. If they discover that the towel dispensers are empty or broken, there is typically a moment of indecision. Although they sometimes proceed to wash their hands and then dry them on their clothes, many times they hesitate, facially display disgust, and audibly sigh. By performing these gestures-in-the-round, they express a desire to wash their hands; their hands remain contaminated, but their regard for their own and others' sacredness is established.

Because the profaning power of odor operates over a distance and in all directions, moreover, individuals who defecate in public bathrooms not only temporarily profane themselves but also risk profaning the entire setting. If an individual is clearly responsible for the odor of feces or flatus that fills a bathroom, therefore, he or she must rely on others to identify sympathetically with his or her plight and, consequently, exercise tactful blindness. However, this is seldom left to chance. When other occupants of the bathroom are acquaintances, the offending individual may offer a subtle, self-derogatory display as a defensive, face-saving measure (Goffman 1955). Upon emerging from toilet stalls, for example, such persons sometimes look at acquaintances and facially display disgust. Self-effacing humor is also occasionally used in this way. On one occasion, for example, an acquaintance of a member of the research team emerged from a toilet stall after having filled the bathroom with a strong fecal odor. He walked over to a sink, smiled at the observer, and remarked: "Something died in there." Through such subtle self-derogation, offending individuals

metaphorically split themselves into two parts: a sacred self that assigns blame and a blame-worthy animal self. Because the offending individual assigns blame, moreover, there is no need for others to do so (Goffman 1971: 113).

If other occupants of the bathroom are unfamiliar to the offending individual, however, a somewhat different defensive strategy is commonly employed. Upon emerging from a toilet stall, individuals who are clearly responsible for an offensive odor seldom engage in visual interaction with unacquainted others. In so doing, they avoid visually acknowledging not only the presence of others but others' acknowledgment of their own presence as well. In a sense, therefore, the offending individual temporarily suspends his or her claim to the status of sacred object, an object worthy of such visual regard. The assumption seems to be that by suspending one's claim to this status, others need not challenge it and are, consequently, more likely to exercise tactful blindness in regard to the offense.

Thus, despite Miner's humorous misidentification and interpretation of bathroom rituals, there is something to recommend the view that many of the rituals that behaviorally express and sustain the central values of our culture occur in bathrooms. Although those "central values do but itch a little," as Goffman (1971: 185) noted, "everyone scratches." And, it must be added, they often scratch in public bathrooms. However, routine bathroom behavior consists of more than the interpersonal rituals that are found in other public settings or variations on their general theme.

### Backstage Behavior in Public Bathrooms

Clearly, public establishments differ in the degree to which their clients observe generally accepted standards of behavioral propriety. Moreover, the behavior that routinely occurs within an establishment's bathrooms typically reflects the degree of behavioral "tightness or looseness" (Goffman 1963: 200) that characterizes that establishment. For example,



bathrooms in neighborhood bars are characterized by considerably more behavioral looseness than are bathrooms in expensive restaurants. Regardless of the degree of tightness or looseness that characterizes the frontstage region of a public establishment, however, somewhat greater behavioral looseness will be found in the establishment's bathrooms. After all, even the open region of a public bathroom is backstage relative to the setting beyond its doors. As such, public bathrooms offer individuals at least some relief from the behavioral harness that the frontstage audience's eyes impose upon them. . . .

### Managing Personal Fronts

When in a public setting, as Goffman (1963: 24) pointed out, individuals are expected to have their "faculties in readiness for any face-to-face interaction that might come" their way. One of the most evident means by which individuals express such readiness is "through the disciplined management of personal appearance or 'personal front,' that is, the complex of clothing, make-up, hairdo, and other surface decorations" that they carry about on their person (Goffman 1963: 25). Of course, keeping one's personal front in a state of good repair requires care and effort. . . . However, individuals who are inspecting or repairing their personal fronts in public encounter difficulties in maintaining the degree of interactional readiness often expected of them; their attention tends to be diverted from the social situations that surround them (Goffman 1963: 66). For the most part, therefore, close [inspection] and major adjustments of personal fronts are confined to backstage regions such as public bathrooms.

Most public bathrooms are equipped for this purpose. Many offer coin-operated dispensers of a variety of "personal care products" . . . and almost all have at least one mirror. The most obvious reason for the presence of mirrors in public bathrooms is that the act of defecation and, for females, urination, requires individuals to literally "drop" their personal fronts. In order to ensure that they have adequately reconstructed their personal front

after engaging in such an act, individuals must and typically do perform what Lofland (1972) has termed a "readiness check." For example, the following was observed in the men's bathroom of a neighborhood bar:

A young man emerges from a toilet stall and, as he passes the mirror, hesitates. He glances side-long at his reflection, gives a nod of approval and then walks out the door.

When such a readiness check reveals flaws in the individual's personal front, he or she typically makes the appropriate repairs: Shirts are often retucked into pants and skirts, skirts are rotated around the waist, and pants are tugged up and down.

Because bodily movement and exposure to the elements can also disturb a disciplined personal front, the post-defecation or urination readiness check sometimes reveals flaws in individuals' personal fronts that are the result of normal wear and tear. Upon emerging from toilet stalls and leaving urinals, therefore, individuals sometimes repair aspects of their personal fronts that are not normally disturbed in the course of defecating or urinating. For example, the following was observed in the women's bathroom of a student center on a college campus.

A young woman emerges from a toilet stall, approaches a mirror, and inspects her reflection. She then removes a barrette from her hair, places the barrette in her mouth, takes a comb out of her coat pocket, and combs her hair while smoothing it down with her other hand. With the barrette still in her mouth, she stops combing her hair, gazes intently at the mirror and emits an audible "ick." She then places the barrette back in her hair, pinches her cheeks, takes a last look at her reflection and exits.

Interestingly, as both this example and the immediately preceding one illustrate, individuals sometimes offer visible or audible evaluations of their reflections when inspecting and repairing



their personal front, a finding that should delight proponents of Meadian sociological psychology. Public bathrooms may protect individuals from the critical reviews of external audiences, but they do not protect them from those of their internal audience.

In any case, public bathrooms are as much "self-service" repair shops for personal fronts as they are socially approved shelters for physiological acts that are inconsistent with the cleanliness and purity standards that govern our public performances. In fact, individuals often enter public bathrooms with no apparent purpose other than the management of their personal front. For example, it is not uncommon for males to enter public bathrooms, walk directly to the nearest available mirror, comb their hair, rearrange their clothing, and then immediately exit. In our society, of course, females are often expected to present publicly a more extensively managed personal front than are males. Consequently, females often undertake extensive repairs in public bathrooms. For example, the following was observed in the women's bathroom of a student center on a college campus:

Two young women enter, one goes to a toilet stall and the other immediately approaches a mirror. The second woman takes a brush out of her bookbag, throws her hair forward, brushes it, throws her hair back, and brushes it into place. She returns the brush to her bookbag, smooths down her eyebrows, and wipes underneath her eyes with her fingers. She then removes a tube of lipstick from her bookbag, applies it to her lips, and uses her finger to remove the lipstick that extends beyond the natural outline of her lips. As her friend emerges from the toilet stall, she puts the lipstick tube back into her bookbag, straightens her collar so that it stands up under her sweater and then exits with her friend.

Even though individuals routinely inspect and repair their personal fronts in the open regions of public bathrooms, they often do so furtively. When others enter the bathroom, individuals sometimes

suspend inspecting or repairing their personal fronts until the new arrivals enter toilet stalls or approach urinals. In other cases, they hurriedly complete these activities before they can be witnessed. . . . Despite the furtiveness that sometimes characterizes individuals' inspection and repair of their personal fronts, however, the open region of a public bathroom is often the only available setting in which they can engage in these activities without clearly undermining their frontstage performances. As Lofland (1972: 101) observed in a somewhat different context, "it is apparently preferable to be witnessed by a few . . . in a brief episode of backstage behavior than to be caught . . . with one's presentation down" on the frontstage.

### Going Out of Play

While a disciplined personal front may serve to express interactional readiness, public actors must also "exert a kind of discipline or tension" in regard to their bodies in order to actually maintain the degree of interactional readiness that is expected of them (Goffman 1963: 24). After all, a variety of bodily processes can drain individuals' attention away from the social world around them, causing them to turn inward and, interactionally speaking, to go out of play. Of course, the ostensive purpose of public bathrooms and their toilet stalls is to provide public actors with socially approved shelters in which to indulge such bodily processes. . . .

In addition to creature releases that threaten to slip through an individual's self-control, emotional reactions may also cause individuals to go out of play. In such cases, individuals may conclude that precipitant leave-taking is preferable to going out of play in full view of their frontstage audience. Under these circumstances, therefore, they may quickly retreat to the protective cover of a toilet stall. Although it is difficult for an observer to ascertain if this has taken place, it was the research team's impression that incidents, such as those described by Margaret Atwood (1969: 71) in her novel, *The Edible Woman*, are not uncommon. The narrator, Marian, was sitting with some friends in



a bar when she noticed "a large drop of something wet" on the table near her hand.

I poked it with my finger and smudged it around a little before I realized with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then. . . . I was going to break down and make a scene, and I couldn't. I slid out of my chair, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, walked across the room avoiding the other tables with great care, and went to the Ladies Powder Room. Checking first to make sure no one else was in there—I couldn't have witnesses—I locked myself into one of the plushy-pink cubicles and wept for several minutes.

Depending on how precipitant such leave-taking is, of course, same-sexed members of the individual's frontstage audience may feel justified in conversationally intruding on this private preserve in order to inquire about his or her well-being. It is probably easier, however, to deflect such questions from behind the protective cover of a toilet stall than it would be if the frontstage audience witnessed such a display of emotion.

Parallel to individuals who retire to toilet stalls when they are overcome with emotion, entire "performance teams" (Goffman 1959: 77–105) sometimes retreat into public bathrooms in order to conceal the paralyzing embarrassment that results when a collective performance [collapses]. . . . For example, the following conversation between three young women was recorded in the bathroom of a student center on a college campus. Although the incident that led to this conversation was not observed, it obviously resulted in such paralyzing embarrassment.

- A: That was sooo embarrassing! I can't believe that just happened. (general laughter)  
 B: He must think we are the biggest bunch of losers.  
 A: I can't believe I just screamed loud enough for everyone to hear.  
 C: It really wasn't all that loud. I'm sure he didn't hear you.

A: How can you say that? He turned around just as I said it. Why didn't you guys tell me he was standing right there?

B: —, we didn't see him right away, and I did try to tell you but you were so busy talking that I . . .

A: I can't believe that just happened. I feel like such an asshole.

B: Don't worry 'bout it. At least he knows who you are now. Are you ready?

A: I'm so embarrassed. What if he's still out there?

B: You're gonna have to see him at some point.

In addition to concealing a temporary loss of control, these defensive strategies also buy individuals and performance teams time, as this example illustrates, in which to gather themselves together before once again facing the frontstage audience.

However, occupants of public bathrooms and their toilet stalls who use them for purposes other than those for which they were explicitly designed must exercise some caution. Unusual or unusually loud noises and unusually long occupancy, if someone is aware of the duration of the occupancy, may lead others to intrude upon these private preserves. By implication, individuals who use public bathrooms and their toilet stalls in order to conceal autoerotic activities, the usage of illicit drugs, emotional reactions, or other potentially discrediting acts must still exercise a degree of self-control.

### Staging Talk

As Goffman (1959: 175) observed, performance teams routinely use backstage regions to gather themselves together [and] discuss . . . problems involved in the staging of their collective performance:

Here the team can run through its performance, checking for offending expressions when no audience is present to be affronted by them; here poor members of the team . . . can be schooled or dropped from the performance.



In the conversation reproduced above, for example, B and C not only attempt to belittle the discrediting implications of A's earlier actions, but B also schools A in the art of staging collective performances. If, according to B, A had paid more attention to the other team members' directional cues, she could have avoided this embarrassing incident.

In addition to retreating into public bathrooms after the failure of a collective performance, performance teams also retire to public bathrooms in order to take preventive measures against such an occurrence. Here the team may agree upon collusive signals, rehearse their planned performance, and exchange strategic information. In bathrooms in bars, for example, performance teams were sometimes overheard discussing the planned targets of members' erotic overtures, the overtures they had received, the source of such overtures, and their likely responses. By providing other members of a performance team with such strategic information, of course, an individual may prevent them from interfering with his or her personal project and may even enlist their aid in accomplishing it.

Sometimes, moreover, the backstage discussions that occur in public bathrooms are at least partially concerned with a team member's morale or that of the entire team. In the previously discussed conversation between the three young women, for example, B and C attempt to boost A's morale by both belittling the discrediting implications of her earlier actions and encouraging her to "go on with the show." As Goffman (1959: 175) pointed out, backstage derogation of the audience is another strategy that performance teams commonly employ in order to maintain their morale. For example, a young woman was overheard making the following remark to two other young women in the bathroom of a popular nightclub.

You guys think I'm obnoxious! WELL just take a look at \_\_\_\_\_, my God!

In any case, both performance teams and individual performers ... routinely use public bathrooms as staging areas for their public performances. ...

### Conclusion

The behavior that routinely occurs within [public bathrooms] reveals, by way of contrast, some of the requirements that we must meet in order to maintain an unblemished public face. As the preceding analysis indicates, typical bathroom behaviors include the open staging of public performances, the concealment of emotional reactions, the indulgence of creature releases, and the inspection and repair of personal fronts. If, moreover, public bathrooms are backstage regions relative to the public settings beyond their doors, then the behaviors that tend to be confined to public bathrooms are inconsistent with the behavioral standards that govern our public performances. By implication, therefore, these standards would seem to require the presentation of a disciplined personal front, the avoidance of visible concern with its maintenance, the suppression of animal natures, some minimal degree of interactional readiness, and performances that appear "only natural." Without such readily accessible backstage regions as public bathrooms, it becomes increasingly difficult to fulfill these requirements; much of what we do in public bathrooms, then, is what we must not do elsewhere but what we must do somewhere.

In addition to noting such backstage behavior, the preceding analysis indicates that a number of interpersonal rituals found in other public settings are also routinely performed in public bathrooms. Although, at first glance, this finding may seem to contradict the characterization of public bathrooms as backstage regions, even "loosely defined" social situations are, in Goffman's (1963: 241) words, "tight little rooms." In fact, it may be within such loosely defined situations that the central values of our culture itch the most and are, by implication, most in need of scratching. Within



public bathrooms, the animal natures behind our expressive masks and the blemishes underneath our disciplined personal fronts are often exposed. When we find ourselves in such ritually delicate situations, we need assurances that we retain our small patrimony of sacredness despite evidence to the contrary. In a sense, interpersonal rituals are routinely performed in public bathrooms because of, rather than in spite of, their backstage character.

In short, systematic study of routine bathroom behavior reveals just how loyal members of this society are to the central values and behavioral standards that hold our collective lives together. Whatever else they may do, users of public bathrooms continue to bear the "cross of personal character" (Goffman 1971: 185), and, as long as they continue to carry this burden, remain self-regulating participants in the "interaction order" (Goffman 1983).

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### Reflective Questions

1. Why are there walls and doors in public bathrooms? What do they protect us from? Why don't we comment on offensive sounds or smells or look at others while they are going to the bathroom? How do stalls mark social spaces and boundaries in public bathrooms? How do our expectations and behaviors change when we move from one space to another?
2. What is a ritual? To what do rituals attest? What common rituals do we engage in when we are in a public restroom? What values are these rituals protecting?
3. Why do we adjust our clothing and hair in public restrooms? Why do we maintain a "disciplined personal front"? Outside of urination, defecation, and adjusting our appearance, what other activities do we do in restrooms? Why there?
4. We enact rituals in other public spaces: consider entering and exiting a building, attending a public talk, or navigating a public bus. What rituals do we practice in each setting, and what values are we protecting? How do our actions rely on the cooperation of others? What role does personal space play in these rituals? Research by Edward Hall found that Westerners have four circles of personal space: an intimacy bubble in which only the closest of contacts interact, a personal bubble reserved for friends and close associates, social distance that characterizes formal encounters, and a public space for performers and audience. How do rituals breach these spaces or reinforce them? Hall also found that Westerners have a smaller social bubble than others. What happens when Westerners interact with others who are accustomed to interacting more closely? What feelings are conjured? Why?



## Working 'the Code' in the Inner City

NIKKI JONES

*Individuals' actions are guided by their definitions of the situations in which they act, but those situations are not of their own choosing. Their social structural positions profoundly shape the circumstances under which they must act. Also, their interpretations of those circumstances are not of their own invention but are based on cultural and subcultural meanings borrowed from the social groups to which they belong. Cultural and subcultural understandings historically emerge, in turn, from particular groups' collective attempts to cope with the circumstances they face. Social structures thereby influence individuals' actions both directly and indirectly. They shape the cultural and subcultural meanings individuals use to interpret their current circumstances and largely determine the nature of those circumstances.*

*This selection highlights the cultural and subcultural meanings that guide the interactions of African-American girls who live in inner-city neighborhoods. The author, Nikki Jones, points out that "survival is an ongoing project" for these girls, particularly because of the violence that surrounds them. To ensure their survival, the girls (like their male counterparts) organize their interactions in terms of "the code of the street". As Elijah Anderson (1999) has chronicled, this code consists of informal rules that dictate both how one should comport oneself in public and how one should react if challenged by others. Above all, the code revolves around the issue of respect. To get treated with*

*respect on inner-city streets, young men and women must present a "tough" personal front—a front that conveys their willingness to engage in violence if threatened or challenged.*

*Jones illustrates how African American girls interpret the code and use it to guide their actions and interactions. In doing so, Jones portrays how the code of the streets serves as "a system of accountability" and cultural script for these girls. It defines the situation of life on the streets for them, providing a template for how they should present themselves, how they should interact with others, and how they should handle threats to their reputation or well-being. In examining how inner-city African American girls work the code, Jones also points out the importance of gender, noting how the girls' understandings and actions both overlap and diverge from the understandings and actions of their male counterparts.*

*The "code of the street" represents the kind of interpretive frames and implicit understandings that people bring to interaction. These frames and understandings organize our perceptions, shape our expectations, and inform the identities we present and negotiate. Once we effectively establish an identity, whether it be "student," "friend," or "bad ass," it suggests what will be expected of us and what we can expect of one another during our interaction. To the extent that we fulfill those expectations, we engage in recurrent patterns of interaction and construct*

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*enduring forms of social relationships. Unfortunately, as Jones demonstrates in this selection, in some cases these recurrent patterns perpetuate structures and outlooks that foster conflict, aggression, and violence.*

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In mainstream American society, it is commonly assumed that women and girls shy away from conflict, are not physically aggressive, and do not fight like boys and men. Popular representations of 'mean girls', who 'fight with body language and relationships instead of fists and knives' reinforce common understandings about gender-based differences in the use of physical force (Simmons 2002; Wiseman 2003). Relying on commonplace dichotomies to explain girls' behavior, however, seriously limits our understanding of those young women who engage in symbolic and physical battles for respect and status.

In this article, I draw on field research among African-American girls in the United States to argue that the circumstances of inner-city life have encouraged the development of uniquely situated femininities that simultaneously encourage and limit inner-city girls' use of physical aggression and violence. First, I begin by arguing that, in the urban environments that I studied, gender—being a girl—does not protect inner-city girls from much of the violence experienced by inner-city boys. In fact, teenaged boys and girls are both preoccupied with 'survival' as an ongoing project. I use my analysis of interviews with young people involved in violent incidents to demonstrate similarities in how young people work 'the code of the street' across perceived gender lines. I conclude this article by describing how gender structures teenaged girls' and boys' use of physical aggression and violence in distinct ways. This in-depth examination of young people's use of physical aggression and

violence reveals that while young men and young women fight, survival is still a gendered project.

#### Race, Gender, and Inner-City Violence

Inner-city life has changed dramatically over the last century and especially over the last 30 years; the country's recent postindustrial shift from a production economy to a service economy has encouraged the growth of white, middle-class suburbs and intensified levels of residential segregation in urban areas (Anderson, 1999; Massey & Denton 1993; Wilson, 1996, 1987, 1980). The concentration of poor, racialised minorities in inner-city neighborhoods in the United States has created a 'harsh and extremely disadvantaged environment' to which inner-city residents, especially poor, Black Americans, must adapt (Anderson, 1999; Massey & Denton, 1993, p. 13; Wilson, 1996, 1987, 1980). Despite declining rates of violent crime over much of the last decade, many inner-city residents remain concerned about the relative prevalence of interpersonal violence in their neighborhoods, which is, according to urban ethnographer Elijah Anderson, governed by the "code of the street" (Anderson, 1994, 1999).

In his ethnographic account of life in inner-city Philadelphia, Elijah Anderson writes that the code of the street is 'a set of prescriptions and proscriptions, or informal rules, of behavior organised around a desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence among so many residents, particularly young men and women' (Anderson, 1999, p. 10). Furthermore, the code is 'a system of accountability that promises 'an eye for an eye', or a certain 'payback' for transgressions' (Anderson, 1999, p. 10). . . . According to Anderson, it is this complex relationship between masculinity, respect and violence that, at times, encourages poor, urban young men to risk their lives in order to be recognized and respected by others as a man.

Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins considers Anderson's discussion of masculinity and



the 'code of the street' in her recent analysis of the relationship between hegemonic (and racialised) masculinities and femininities, violence and dominance (Collins, 2004, pp. 188–212). . . . Collins (2004) argues that the recent hypercriminalisation of urban spaces is exacerbated by the culture of the code. As young men from distressed urban areas cycle in and out of correctional facilities at historically remarkable rates, she argues, urban public schools, street corners and homes have become a ' . . . nexus of street, prison and youth cultures', which exerts 'a tremendous amount of pressure on Black men, especially young, working class men, to avoid being classified as "weak"' (Collins, 2004, p. 211). Collins argues that young men's responses to the present-day circumstances of inner-city life reflect elements of hegemonic masculinity, especially the common belief that a 'real man' must demonstrate control 'over all forms of violence', as well as 'contemporary ideas about Black masculinity'. . . .

### Criminological Theories on Gender and Violence

Over the last few decades, feminist criminologists and gender and crime scholars have examined women's and girls' experiences with aggression and violence with increasing complexity. . . . Emphasizing how particular material circumstances influence women and girls' relationship to violence shifts the focus from the consideration of dichotomous gender differences to the empirical examination of gender similarities and differences in experiences with violence among young women and men who live in poor, urban areas (Simpson 1991). The analysis presented here follows in this tradition by recognizing the influence of shared life circumstances on young people's use of violence. . . .

The young people from Philadelphia's inner-city neighborhoods that I encountered generally share similar life circumstances, yet how they respond to these structural and cultural circumstances—that is, how they work the code of the street—is also

gendered in ways that reflect differences among inner-city girls' and boys' understanding of what you 'got to' do to 'survive'.

### Methods

Each of the respondents featured in this study was enrolled in a city hospital-based violence intervention project that targeted youth aged 12 to 24 who presented in the emergency department as a result of an intentional violent incident and were considered to be at either moderate or high risk for involvement in future violent incidents. As a consequence of patterns of racial segregation within the city, almost the entire population of young women and men who voluntarily enrolled in the hospital's violence intervention project were African-American.

My fieldwork for this study took place in three phases over 3 years (2001–2003). During the first phase of the study, which lasted about a year and a half, I conducted 'ride alongs' with intervention counselors who met with young people in their homes shortly after their initial visit to the emergency room. I also conducted a series of interviews with members of the intervention counseling staff. Most of the staff grew up in Philadelphia and were personally familiar with many of the neighborhoods we visited. During this time and throughout the study, I also observed interactions in the spaces and places that were significant in the lives of the young people I met. These spaces included trolley cars and buses (transportation to and from school), a neighborhood high school nicknamed 'the Prison on the Hill', the city's family and criminal court, and various correctional facilities in the area. I also intentionally engaged in extended conversations with grandmothers and mothers, sisters, brothers, cousins and friends of the young people I visited and interviewed (see Anderson, 1999, pp. 10–11; Anderson 2001). I recorded this information in my field notes and used it to complement, supplement, test and, at times, verify the information collected during interviews.



**Shared Circumstances, Shared Code**

While the problem of inner-city violence is believed to impact boys and men only, my interviews with teenaged inner-city girls revealed that young women are regularly exposed to many of the same forms of violence that men are exposed to in their everyday lives and are deeply influenced by its normative order. In the inner-city neighborhoods I visited, which were often quite isolated from the rest of the city, I encountered young men and young women who could quickly recall a friend, relative or 'associate' who had been shot, robbed, or stabbed. In the public high school I visited, I watched adolescent girls and boys begin their school day with the same ritual: they dropped their bags on security belts, stepped through a metal detector, and raised their arms and spread their legs for a police-style 'patdown' before entering the building. Repeatedly, I encountered teenaged girls who, like the young men they share space with in the inner city, had stories to tell about getting 'rolled on', or getting 'jumped', or about the 'fair one' gone bad. It is these shared circumstances of life that engender a shared understanding about how to survive in a setting where your safety is never guaranteed. In the following sections, I provide portraits of four young people involved in violent incidents in order to illustrate what was revealed to me during the course of field research and interviews: an appreciation of 'the code of the street' that cut across gender lines. The first two respondents, Billy and DeLisha, tell stories of recouping from a very public loss in a street fight. The second set of respondents, Danielle and Robert, highlight how even those who are averse to fighting must sometimes put forth a 'tough front' to deter potentially aggressive challenges in the future.

**Billy and DeLisha: 'I'm Not Looking Over My Shoulder'**

Billy was 'jumped' by a group of young men while in 'their' neighborhood, which is within walking distance of his own. He tells me this story as we sit in the living room of his row home. Billy recently

reached his 20s, although he looks older than his age. He is White but shares a class background that is similar to many of the young people I interviewed. His block, like most of the others I visited during this study, is a collection of row homes in various states of disrepair. Billy spends more time here than he would like. He is unemployed and when asked how best the intervention project he enrolled in could help him his request was simple: I need a job. As we talk, I think that Billy is polite—he offers me a drink (a beer, which I decline) before we begin our interview—and even quiet. He recalls two violent battles within the last year, both of which ended with him in the emergency room, without wavering too far from a measured, even tone. The first incident he recalls for me happened in South Philadelphia. He was walking down the block, when he came across a group of guys on the corner, guys who he had 'trouble' with in the past. As he stood talking to an acquaintance, Billy was approached from behind and punched in the back of the head. The force of the punch was multiplied exponentially by brass knuckles, 'split[ting] [his] head open'. Billy was knocked out instantly, fell face-first toward the ground and split his nose on a concrete step. The thin scar from this street-fight remains several months later.

In contrast to Billy's even tone, DeLisha is loud. She is thin with a medium brown complexion. Her retelling of the story of her injury is more like a reenactment as the adrenaline, anxiety, and excitement of the day return. She comes across as fiercely independent, especially for a 17-year-old girl. DeLisha, a young mother with a 1-year-old daughter, has been unable to rely on her own drug-addicted mother for much of her life. After years of this independence, she is convinced that she does not need anyone's help to 'make it' in life. While she has been a 'fighter' for as long as she can remember, she was never hurt before. Not in school. Not in her neighborhood, which is one of the most notorious in the city. And not like this. She had agreed to a fight with another neighborhood girl. The younger girl, pressured by her family and peers to win the



battle, shielded a box-cutter from DeLisha's sight until the very last minute. When it seemed that she would lose, the girl flashed the box-cutter and slashed DeLisha across the hand, tearing past skin and muscle into a tendon on her arm.

During my interviews with Billy and DeLisha, I asked each of them how these very public losses, which also resulted in serious physical injuries, would influence their mobility within the neighborhood. Would they avoid certain people and places? Would or could they shrug their loss off or would they seek vengeance for their lost battle? Billy's and DeLisha's responses were strikingly similar in tone, nearly identical at some points, and equally revealing of two of the most basic elements of the code of the street: the commitment to maintaining a 'tough front' and 'payback'.

BILLY: I mean, just like I say, I walk around this neighborhood. I'm not looking over my shoulder. . . . I'm not going to walk [and] look around my shoulder because I've got people looking for me. I mean you want me . . . you know where I live. They can call me at any time they want. That's how, that's how I think. . . . I'm not going to sit around my own neighborhood and just say: 'Aww, I got to watch my back.' You want me? You got me.

DELISHA: I'm not a scared type . . . I walk on the streets anytime I want to. I do anything I want to, anytime I want to do it. It's never been a problem walking on the street 3:00 in the morning. If I want to go home 3:00 in the morning, I'm going to go home. I'm not looking over my shoulder. My grandma never raised me to look over my shoulder. I'm not going to stop because of some little incident [being cut in the hand with a box-cutter].

Billy and DeLisha's strikingly similar responses reveal their commitment to a shared 'system of accountability,' the code of the street, which, as Anderson argues, governs much of social life, especially violence, in distressed urban areas (Anderson, 1999). Billy and DeLisha hold themselves accountable

to this system ('I'm not going to . . .') and are also aware that others will hold them accountable for their behaviors and actions. Billy and DeLisha are acutely aware that someone who 'looks over their shoulder' while walking down the street is perceived as weak, a moving target, and both are determined to reject such a fate. Instead, Billy and DeLisha remain committed to managing their 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1959) in a way that masks any signs of vulnerability.

In addition to their commitment to 'not looking over their shoulder,' Billy and DeLisha are also sensitive to the fact that the fights they were in were not 'fair.' These street-level injustices inform Billy and DeLisha's expectations for retaliation. Consistent with the code, both Billy and DeLisha—equally armed with long fight histories—realize the importance of 'payback' and consider future battles with their challengers to be inevitable. When I asked DeLisha if she anticipated another fight with the young woman who cut her, she replied with a strong yes, 'because I'm taking it there with her.' Billy was also equally committed to retaliation, telling me: ' . . . one by one, I will get them.'

#### Danielle and Robert: 'Sometimes You Got to Fight'

In *Code of the Street* (1999), Anderson demonstrates how important it is for young people to prove publicly that they are not someone to be 'messed with.' One of the ways that young people prove this to others is by engaging in fights in public, when necessary. The following statements from Danielle and Robert, two young people who are adept at avoiding conflicts, illustrate teenaged girls' and boys' shared understanding of the importance of demonstrating that one is willing to fight as a way to deter ongoing challenges to one's well-being:

DANIELLE: 'cause sometimes you got to fight, not fight, but get into that type of battle to let them know that I'm not scared of you and you can't keep harassing me thinking that it's okay.



ROBERT: . . . you know, if someone keep picking on you like that, you gonna have to do something to prove a point to them: that you not going to be scared of them. . . . So, sometimes you do got to, you do got to fight. Cause you just got to tell them that you not scared of them.

Like DeLisha and Billy, Danielle, a recent high-school graduate, and Robert, who is in the 11th grade, offer nearly identical explanations of the importance of physically protecting one's own boundaries by demonstrating to others that you will fight, if necessary. While neither Danielle nor Robert identify as 'fighters', both are convinced that sometimes you 'got to fight'. Again, this shared language reveals an awareness and commitment to a shared system of accountability, 'the code of the street', which encourages young people—teenaged girls and boys—to present a 'tough front' as a way to discourage ongoing challenges to one's personal security. For the young people in this study, the value placed on maintaining a tough front or 'proving a point' cut across perceived gender lines.

In addition to possibly deterring future challenges, Anderson argues that presenting and ultimately proving oneself as someone who is not to be 'messed with' helps to build a young person's confidence and self-esteem: 'particularly for young men and perhaps increasingly among females . . . their identity, their self-respect, and their honor are often intricately tied up with the way they perform on the streets during and after such [violent] encounters' (Anderson, 1999, p. 76). Those young people who are able to perform well during these public encounters acquire a sense of confidence that will facilitate their movement throughout the neighborhood. This boost to one's sense of self is not restricted to young men; young women who can fight and win may also demonstrate a strong sense of pride and confidence in their ability to 'handle' potentially aggressive or violent conflicts, as illustrated by the following interview with Nicole.

#### Nicole: 'I Feel Like I Can Defend Myself'

My conversation with Nicole typifies the confidence expressed by teenaged girls who can fight and win. Nicole is a smart, articulate young woman who attended some community college courses while still a senior in high school. She planned to attend a state university to study engineering after graduation. While in high school, she tells me, she felt confident in her ability to walk the hallways of her sometimes chaotic public school: 'I feel like I can defend myself'. Unlike some young women who walk the hallways constantly testing others, Nicole's was a quiet confidence: 'I don't, like, I mean, when I'm walking around school or something, I don't walk around talking about "yeah, I beat this girl up"'. Nicole could, in fact, claim that she didn't beat up just one girl but several, at the same time. Nicole explained to me how her most recent fight began:

We [she and another young woman] had got into two arguments in the hallway and then her friends were holding her back. So I just said, 'Forget it. I'm just going to my class'. So I'm in class, I'm inside the classroom and I hear Nina say, 'Is this that bitch's class?' I came to the door and was like, 'Yes, this is my class'. And she puts her hands up [in fighting position] and she swings. . . . And me and her was fighting, and then I got her on the wall, and then I felt somebody pulling my hair, and it turns out to be Jessica. Right? And then we fighting, and then I see Tasha, and it's me and all these three people and then they broke it all up.

Nicole's only injury in the fight came from the elbow of the school police officer who eventually ended the battle. As Nicole recalls this fight, and her performance in particular, I notice that she is smiling. This smile, together with the tone in which she tells the story of her earlier battle, makes it clear that she is proud of her ability to meet the challenge presented to her by these young women. Impressed at her ability to fight off three teenaged girls at the same time, I ask Nicole: 'How did you manage not to get jumped?' She quickly corrects



my definition of the situation: 'No. I managed to beat them up'. After retelling her fight story, Nicole shakes her head from side to side and says: 'I had to end up beating them up. So sad. I notice her sure smile return. 'You don't really look like you feel bad about that', I say. 'I don't,' she replies.

The level of self-confidence that Nicole displays in this brief exchange contrasts with the passivity and submissiveness that is commonly expected of women and girls, especially white, middle-class women and girls (Collins, 2004). It is young men, not teenaged girls, who are expected to exude such confidence as they construct a 'tough front' to deter would-be challengers (Anderson, 1999). Nicole's confidence is also more than an expressive performance. Nicole knows that she is physically able to fight and win, when necessary, because she has done so in the past. For teenaged girls like Nicole and Sharmaine, whom I discuss below, this confidence is essential to their evaluation of how best to handle potential interpersonal conflicts in their everyday lives.

#### Sharmaine: '... I Have One Hand Left'

Sharmaine, an 8th-grader, displayed a level of self-confidence similar to Nicole's after a fight with a boy in her classroom. Moments before the fight, the boy approached Sharmaine while she was looking out her classroom window, and 'whispered something' in her ear. Sharmaine knew that this boy liked her, but she thought she had made it quite clear that she did not like him. Sharmaine quickly told him to back off and then looked to her teacher for reinforcement. Her teacher, Sharmaine recalls, just laughed at the boy's advances. After he whispered in Sharmaine's ear a second time, she turned around and punched him in the face. Sharmaine later ended up in the emergency room with a jammed finger from the punch. I asked Sharmaine if she was concerned about him getting back at her when she returned to school. She tells me that someone in the emergency room asked her the same question. 'What did you say?' I ask. 'I told them no ... because I have one hand left.'

For young women like Nicole and Sharmaine, the proven ability to defend themselves translates into a level of self-confidence that is not typically expected in girls and young women. Those girls who are confident in their ability to 'take care of themselves' become more mobile as they come to believe, as DeLisha says, that they can 'do anything [they] want to, anytime [they] want to do it'. Girls who are able to gain and maintain this level of self-confidence are able to challenge the real and imagined gendered boundaries on space and place in the inner city.

#### Survival: A Gendered Project

Much of the literature on violence and masculinity reveals that for men in general and poor men of colour in particular, 'manhood and survival are often two sides of the same coin' (Anderson, 1999, p. 91; see also Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, pp. 132–141 and Collins, 2004, pp. 185–193). Because the project of accomplishing one's manhood overlaps with the project of survival, it is not enough for a teenaged boy to become an able fighter or to maintain a tough front, as it tends to be for young women. For young men, what is often perceived to be on the line is not only the outcome of the fight but also manhood itself. In contrast to young men's concern with public and potentially life-threatening displays of 'manhood', the young women in this study typically considered the use of physical aggression or violence as a means to an end, rather than a defining characteristic of being a woman. In the remainder of this article, I describe how intersecting survival and gender projects may encourage young men's use of violence and simultaneously encourage and limit inner-city girls' use of physical aggression and violence.

#### 'Boys Got to Go Get Guns'

The need to be 'distinguished as a man'—a benchmark of hegemonic masculinity—often fosters adolescent boys' preoccupation with distinguishing themselves from women (Anderson, 1999; Collins, 2004, p. 210; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This



is a gendered preoccupation that was not revealed in urban adolescent girls' accounts of physical aggression and violence. The following statement from Craig, a young man who has deliberately checked his readiness to fight after being shot in the hip, illustrates how the need to 'be a man' influences young men's consideration of violence:

Yeah, I don't fight no more. I can't fight [because of injury]. So, I really stop and think about stuff because it isn't even worth it . . . unless, I mean, you really want it [a fight] to happen . . . I'm going to turn the other cheek. But, I'm not going to be, like, wearing a skirt. That's the way you got to look at it.

While Craig is prepared to exit his life as a 'fighter', he predicts that his newfound commitment to avoid fights will not stand up to the pressure of proving his manhood to a challenger. Craig is well aware of how another young man can communicate that he 'really want[s] [a fight] to happen'. Once a challenger publicly escalates a battle in this way, young men like Craig have few choices. At this moment, a young man will have to demonstrate to his challenger, and his audience, that he isn't 'wearing a skirt'. Not only must he fight, he must also fight like a man. Craig's admission is revealing of how a young man's concern with not being 'like' a woman influences his consideration of the appropriate use of physical aggression. While a similar type of preoccupation with intergender distinctions was not typically revealed in young women's accounts, I found that teenaged girls were generally aware of at least one significant difference in how young women and men were expected to work the code of the street. As is revealed in my conversation with Shante, a teenaged girl who was hit in the head with a brick by a neighborhood girl, young men are generally expected to use more serious or lethal forms of violence than girls or women. I asked Shante what people in her neighborhood thought about girls fighting.

"Today," she asked, "you mean like people on the street?"

"Yeah."

"If [a girl] get beat up, you just get beat up. That's on you."

"Do you think it's different for boys?" I asked.

"Umm, boys got to go get guns. They got to blow somebody's head off. They got to shoot. They don't fight these days. They use guns."

Shante's perception of what boys 'got to' do is informed by years of observation and experience. Shante has grown up in a neighborhood marked by violence. Days before this interview, she saw a young man get shot in the head. She tells me he was dead by the time he hit the sidewalk. When I asked Shante whether or not girls used guns, she could recall just one young woman from the neighborhood—the same young woman who hit Shante over the head with a brick—who had 'pistol whipped' another teenaged girl. While she certainly used the gun as a weapon, she didn't shoot her. These two incidents are actually quite typical of reported gender differences in the use of weapons in violent acts: boys and men are much more likely than girls and women to use guns to shoot and kill. Women and girls, like many of the young women I spoke with during this study, are far more likely to rely on knives and box-cutters, if they use a weapon at all (see also Miller, 1998 & 2001; Pastor, et al., 1996, p. 28). Those young women who did use a weapon, such as a knife or box-cutter, explained that they did so for protection. For example, Shante told me that she carried a razor blade, 'because she doesn't trust people'.

#### Takeya: 'A Good Girl'

In contrast to the commitment to protecting one's manhood, which Craig alludes to and Elijah Anderson describes in great detail (Anderson, 1999), the young women I spoke to did not suggest that they fought because that's what women do. Furthermore, while young women deeply appreciated the utility of a 'tough front', they were unlikely to use phrases like 'I don't want to be wearing a skirt'. In fact, while young men like Craig work to prove their manhood by distinguishing themselves from



women, many of the young women I spoke with—including the 'toughest' among them—embraced popular notions of femininity, 'skirts' and all. For many of the girls I interviewed, an appreciation of some aspects of hegemonic femininity modulated their involvement in violent interactions.

My conversation with Takeya sheds light on how inner-city girls attempt to reconcile the contradictory concerns that emerge from intersecting survival and gender projects. When I asked Takeya, a slim 13-year-old girl with a light brown complexion, about her fighting history, she replied, 'I'm not in no fights. I'm a good girl.' 'You are a good girl?' I asked. 'Yeah, I'm a good girl and I'm-a be a pretty girl at 18.' Takeya's concern with being a 'pretty girl' reflects an appreciation of aspects of hegemonic femininity that place great value on beauty. Her understanding of what it means to be beautiful is also influenced by the locally placed value on skin colour, hair texture and body figure. While brown skin and textured hair may not fit hegemonic (White, middle-class) conceptions of beauty, in this setting, a light brown skinned complexion, 'straight' or 'good' hair, and a slim figure help to make one 'pretty' and 'good' (Banks, 2000). Yet, Takeya also knows that one's ability to stay pretty—to be a pretty girl at age 18—is directly influenced by one's involvement in interpersonal aggression or violence.

In order to be considered a 'pretty girl' by her peers, Takeya knows that she must avoid those types of interpersonal conflicts that tend to result in cuts and scratches to young women's faces, especially the ones that others consider beautiful (in *Code of the Street* [1999], Anderson writes that such visible scars often result in heightened status for the young women who leave their mark on pretty girls). Yet, Takeya is also aware that the culture of the code requires her to become an able fighter and to maintain a reputation as such. After expressing her commitment to being a 'good' girl, Takeya is sure to inform me that not only does she know how to fight, others also recognise her as an able fighter: 'I don't want you to think I don't know how to fight.

I mean everybody always come get me [for fights]. [I'm] the number one [person they come to get]'.

Takeya's simultaneous embrace of the culture of code and some aspects of normative femininity, Craig's concern with distinguishing himself from women, and Shante's convincing disclosure regarding what boys 'got to' do highlight how masculinity and femininity projects overlap and intersect with the project of survival for young people in distressed inner-city neighborhoods. Both Craig and Takeya appreciate fundamental elements of 'the code', especially the importance of being known as an able fighter. Yet, Craig's use of physical aggression is likely to be encouraged by his commitment to a distinctive aspect of hegemonic masculinity: being distinguished from a girl. Meanwhile, Takeya's use of physical aggression and violence is tempered—though not extinguished—by seemingly typical 'female' concerns: being a 'good' and 'pretty' girl. In contrast to the project of accomplishing masculinity, which overlaps and, at times, contradicts the project of survival for young men, the project of accomplishing femininity can, at times, facilitate young women's struggle to survive in this setting.

### Intersecting Projects: Gender, Survival, and 'the Code'

I have argued that gender does not protect young women from much of the violence young men experience in distressed inner-city neighborhoods, and that given these shared circumstances, it becomes equally important for women and men to work 'the code of the street'. Like many adolescent boys, young women also recognise that reputation, respect and retaliation—the '3 Rs' of the code of the street—organise their social world (Anderson, 1999). Yet, as true as it is that, at times, young men and women work the code of the street in similar ways, it is also true that differences exist. These differences are rooted in the relationships between masculinity, femininity, and the use of violence or aggression in distressed urban areas and emerge from overlapping and intersecting survival and



gender projects. In order to 'survive' in today's inner city, young women like DeLisha, Danielle, Shante, and Takeya are encouraged to embrace some aspects of the 'code of the street', that organises much of inner-city life (Anderson 1999). In doing so, these girls also embrace and accomplish some aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are embedded in the code. My analysis of interviews with teenaged girls and boys injured in intentional violent incidents reveals an appreciation of the importance of maintaining a tough front and demonstrating nerve across perceived gender lines. It is this appreciation of the cultural elements of the code that leads teenaged girls like Danielle to believe strongly that 'sometimes you got to fight'.

My analysis also reveals, however, that teenaged girls do not embrace all elements of hegemonic masculinity that are embedded in the code equally. For example, the inner-city girls I interviewed generally resisted, and at times flatly rejected, the 'coupling' (Collins, 2004) of strength with dominance, which is fundamental to the code of the street. Rather, many of the young women and girls I interviewed believed that escalating the negotiation of conflict to the use of lethal violence was senseless or 'stupid'. Even DeLisha, who easily identifies as a 'fighter' admits: 'I really would beat her up, real bad, and then leave her there. *That would be the end of that*' [emphasis mine]. While boys 'got to go get guns', a belief that highlights the widely perceived connection between masculinity, strength and dominance, the teenaged girls I interviewed typically suggested that 'strong' women 'survive' in the most literal sense.

In many ways, the teenaged girls in this study remain as concerned with survival as 'strong' Black women and girls were in earlier historical periods. However, in today's inner city, where the culture of the code organises much of social life, what a girl has 'got to' do to survive has changed. So, while strength remains a source of power for teenaged girls coming of age in today's inner city it does so with a contradictory twist, since using aggression or violence to demonstrate one's strength can

actually increase the likelihood of one's victimisation (Stewart et al., 2006) and seriously undermine the collective wellbeing of a community. That the teenaged girls in this study do not (yet) couple strength with dominance offers some hope that structural and cultural interventions can stem the increasing numbers of girls who enter hospitals or correctional facilities as a result of interpersonal violence. Without such interventions, however, it is possible that a larger number of poor, urban girls may share the experiences of inner-city boys who live and all too often die by the 'code of the street'.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is "the code of the street" that informs interaction among inner-city youth? What are the "three Rs" that serve as central features of this code? What is the relationship between the code and inner-city violence? How does the code serve as a system of accountability?
2. How does the code of the street organize the interactions of African-American girls in urban neighborhoods? How does the code shape the self-presentations of these girls? For instance, what kind of front do they have to convey in many of their interactions? How does this front help them to earn respect and ward off potential threats?
3. What are the differences between how boys and girls enact the code? How do they vary in the forms of violence they use to issue "payback" and preserve their sense of honor?
4. What code of conduct governs the interaction of students on college campuses? Does this code include some elements of the three Rs that characterize the code of the streets? How do students expect one another to respond if their reputations are questioned? What forms of "payback" do they encourage or tolerate? How and why is respect a central feature of this code?



## Making Firefighters Deployable

MATTHEW DESMOND

*Organizations often provide us interaction orders for how to think, feel, and act. Some social scripts are loosely structured and informally passed along; we get exposed by other actors' actions and expectations, as we see in Nikki Jones' study of "the code of the street" among girls. Other scripts are highly structured and formally taught, as Desmond's study of firefighters shows us.*

*Regardless of how we pass along scripts, we make them stick by holding each other accountable in interaction. Jocelyn Hollander (2013) argues there are three dimensions to accountability: orientation, assessment, and enforcement. Orientation is when we redirect our attention to a particular way of thinking and acting. People assess us when they determine how closely we follow an interaction order. They enforce scripts when they judge us according to our compliance, tell us to do things differently, or criticize or hurt us into changing our ways. Over time, we may even come to orient, assess, and enforce ourselves—simply by imagining how others would react to us.*

*In this selection, Desmond demonstrates how an organization which trains wildland firefighters coordinates trainees' disposition toward firefighting, a potentially deadly task. Training manuals and practice scenarios lay out a set of rules and situations—called the Ten and Eighteen—for firefighters to heed in order to stay safe when fighting fires. The Ten and Eighteen define the appropriate approach to firefighting, as well as cautionary conditions so firefighters*

*can evaluate their own safety and when to retreat to protect themselves. Not only do most firefighters come to embrace the Ten and Eighteen during training, but when faced with the deaths of other firefighters, the Ten and Eighteen become the lenses through which investigators and firefighters interpret the causes of their deaths. Desmond shows how the Ten and Eighteen were designed to make firefighters safer by giving them a framework for controlling and responding to danger, but in doing so individualize blame for firefighters' deaths by attributing their deaths to their own incompetence.*

*In this selection, then, we see how people coordinate their actions to pass along an institutionalized interactional order and ensure they act accordingly. Actors get oriented into organizational practices through both formal (e.g., training) and informal means (e.g., talking with a buddy about a death report). The interpretive frameworks and scripts for thinking and acting often are highly involved and coordinated, especially when it comes to high-stakes, risky, or countercultural tasks. In these instances, actors encounter formal introductions to the interaction order, repeated orientation to it, assessment of their social competence based on following the interaction order, and reinforcement by superiors and peers who police their actions. When challenges to the interaction order appear, other institutional actors step in to ensure actors embrace the organizational scripts as their own and reproduce them by interpreting new*

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situations and other people's actions through them. That is, we hold each other accountable.

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### Theories of Risk Taking

In his famous essay "Where the Action Is," Goffman (1967, p. 185) sought to uncover individual motivations for risky behavior (or "action"), "activities that are consequential, problematic, and undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake." To Goffman, action could be explained in large part by one's pursuit of character. "The voluntary taking of serious chances," he remarked (1967, p. 238), "is a means for the maintenance and acquisition of character; it is an end in itself only in relation to other kinds of purpose." One risks to gain social recognition, and he must risk again and again lest this recognition expire. . . . By "risk" Goffman, by his own admission, meant "men's risk," and by "character" he meant "masculinity." . . .

Ever since Goffman (1967, p. 257) stated that "men must be prepared to put up their lives to save their faces," social scientists have argued that men take dangerous risks in order to acquire masculine recognition (Bourdieu 2001 [1998]; Kimmel 1994). Most researchers investigating arenas of risky work have suggested that the hallmarks of a good firefighter, police officer, or soldier are hypermasculine traits such as aggressiveness and toughness (Chetkovich 1997; Manning 1977). . . . And several scholars (e.g., Dwyer 1991; Paap 2006) have suggested that men working in especially dangerous occupations often ignore safety procedures and refuse to don protective gear to avoid violating a masculine ethos by showing weakness.

Lacking from these accounts is sufficient attention to the influence of organizations (Heimer 1988; Short 1984). . . . Ever since the work of Coleman (1974) and Perrow (1999 [1984]), social scientists increasingly have turned to high-risk organizations,

investigating the factors that lead to system breakdowns and successes (e.g., Clarke 2005; Vaughan 1996; Weick 1993). These scholars have done much to advance our knowledge of how organizations unravel at the seams, sometimes with deadly and far-reaching consequences. Yet they have paid less attention to why individuals working within high-risk organizations place themselves in harm's way to begin with and how organizations make sure they remain there (though see Hutter 2001; Vaughan 1996).

. . . In this article, I attempt to offer insight into how organizations shape workers' perceptions in such a way as to ensure they place themselves in harm's way and stand firm when things begin to fall apart. After a discussion on method, I explain how the Forest Service socializes firefighters to understand risk. I then evaluate the degree to which firefighters accept this socialization process, demonstrating that they are trained to view firefighting as an activity dangerous only for the incompetent and exploring how this position holds up when confronted with the death of a firefighter.

. . . This paper argues that the US Forest Service—an organization known for its ability to successfully "[inject] its own outlooks into its men" (Kaufman 1960, p. 237)—exerts considerable influence over the workers who come under its command. It equips firefighters not only with a skill set to deploy on the line but also with a tailored mode of thinking through which firefighting fatalities become, not inevitable outcomes of placing oneself between one of nature's most devastating forces and that which it seeks to destroy, but wholly preventable consequences brought about by the incompetence of the dead.

### Methods and Setting

Mine was full immersion fieldwork—the method that requires investigators to become, as completely as possible, that which they wish to understand (cf. Wacquant 2004)—of a wildland firefighter crew attached to the Elk River Fire Station, an isolated compound situated in the woodlands of northern



Arizona. A member of the firecrew, I worked, ate, slept, socialized, and fought fire with the 14 other men stationed there. Most of my crewmembers were in their late teens and early twenties, although one was 40 and another 55. These two older men had over 20 years of experience, while, for the rest of the crew, the modal number of seasons was three. The Elk River Crew was racially diverse—comprised of Native Americans, Hispanics, blacks, and whites—and most crewmembers came from working-class homes, though all came from rural America. . . .

After securing crewmembers' permission to conduct fieldwork, every day I carried a small notebook and recorded conversations and events. I was able to document interactions as they unfolded or shortly afterward, recording conversations accurately. This was not always possible, especially when firefighting. In such cases, I took notes during breaks and after my crew and I were dismissed, double-checking my representations with crewmembers.

Although all data recorded here are drawn from the summer of 2003, I had served as a wildland firefighter at Elk River before (from 1999 to 2000, and again in 2002). . . .

I also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews, lasting anywhere from 45 minutes to 3 hours, with all 14 of my crewmembers and several Forest Service supervisors. . . .

Finally, to reconstruct the process through which the Forest Service responds to firefighting fatalities, I collected and analyzed four accident investigation manuals and 21 fatality, entrapment, and injury reports—many hundreds of pages in length—along with dozens of press releases and materials I received in training courses. . . .

### Training

During my first few days back on the job in the summer of 2003, I sat through Safety Refresher Training with some other crewmembers from Elk River and Jameson, a neighboring station. All returning firefighters were required to enroll in this

2-day course, where firefighting fundamentals were reinforced. The instructor handed each of us a 24-page booklet titled "Think While You Fight Fire," which would serve as our training guide. The booklet began grimly, citing statistics on firefighting fatalities, entrapments, and shelter deployments. Then it turned swiftly to explaining how we could avoid such fates, how firefighters could sidestep the dangers of wildfire and keep themselves safe on the fireline. In so doing, it featured the Ten Standard Fire Orders and the Eighteen Situations that Shout "Watch Out!" or simply the Ten and Eighteen. With the exception of cursory lessons on wildland-urban interface fires and downhill line construction, the whole of our refresher course was devoted to the Ten and Eighteen (Tables 1 and 2).

During one exercise, we were asked to apply the Ten and Eighteen to various firefighting scenarios taken from previous seasons, one of which was Colorado's Thirtymile fire, which killed four firefighters in 2001. Our instructor reconstructed the fire and the crew's "fatal mistakes," regularly asking, "Now, if you guys were on the crew, what would you have done differently in that scenario?" Subtly, the instructor found fault with the four dead firefighters and their supporting crew; he drew our attention to their inadequate preparation and multiple violations of the Orders and Situations. And following his example, we began offering criticisms of our own. We would have done better, we assured

**Table 1. The Ten Fire Orders**

<b>F</b> ight fire aggressively but provide for safety first.
<b>I</b> nitiate all action based on current and expected fire behavior.
<b>R</b> ecognize current weather conditions and obtain forecasts.
<b>E</b> nsure instructions are given and understood.
<b>O</b> btain current information on fire status.
<b>R</b> emain in communication with crew members, your supervisor and adjoining forces.
<b>D</b> etermine safety zones and escape routes.
<b>E</b> stablish lookouts in potentially hazardous situations.
<b>R</b> etain control at all times.
<b>S</b> tay alert, keep calm, think clearly, act decisively.



**Table 2. The Eighteen Situations that Shout “Watch Out!”**

1. Fire not scouted and sized up	10. Attempting frontal assault on fire
2. In country not seen in daylight	11. Unburned fuel between you and the fire
3. Safety zones and escape routes not identified	12. Cannot see main fire, not in contact with anyone who can
4. Unfamiliar with weather and local factors influencing fire behavior	13. On a hillside where rolling material can ignite fuel below
5. Uninformed on strategies, tactics, and hazards	14. Weather is getting hotter and drier
6. Instructions and assignments not clear	15. Wind increases and/or changes direction
7. No communication link with crewmembers or supervisors	16. Getting frequent spot fires across the line
8. Constructing line without safe anchor point	17. Terrain and fuels make escape to safety zones difficult
9. Building fireline downhill with fire below	18. Taking a nap near the fireline

the instructor; we would have adhered to the Ten and Eighteen—and survived.

In both the 2-day refresher class for returning firefighters and the 2-week basic training course for rookies, the Ten and Eighteen structured training. Firefighters are taught to revere the Orders as rules they must never break and to interpret the Eighteen Situations as dangerous circumstances they should always approach with extreme caution.

### The Ten and Eighteen

Firefighters are regularly quizzed on their knowledge of the mandates. If crewmembers miss just one Order, they are severely chastised. I learned this lesson the hard way one morning when I failed to recall the third Order after questioned by Rex Thurman, the widely-feared forty-seven-year-old head supervisor of the Elk River Firecrew. Thurman promptly assigned me and a fellow crewmember, who also failed the test, one hundred pushups, telling us, “Desmond, Masayesva. If you don’t want to practice your Fire Orders you can practice with your fire *shelters!*” What Thurman meant was that ignorance of the Ten and Eighteen would land us in a deadly situation—a situation where we would have to deploy our fire shelters during an entrapment (a firefighter’s last resort).

Thurman and other supervisors administered such tests throughout the season because they understood these rules to be a firefighter’s safety net—a promise of protection in bold print. As

Thurman once put it, while leading a meeting in the conference room, “We can send you to training until we fill up this room with certificates, but unless you know these things, these Ten Orders, these Eighteen Situations, then you’re gonna fail. And you’re gonna drag down those who are with you to fail. . . . Damn it, we want you here tomorrow. We want you here next year, and it’s pretty simple what you have to do to stay safe: Know your Ten and Eighteen.”

### Making Luck

If we search for the bedrock understanding on which the Ten and Eighteen rests, we soon discover that accepting these rules requires accepting unspoken institutionalized principles that influence the way firefighters understand risk. These principles—primarily personal accountability and individual responsibility—buttress the Forest Service’s conception of risk, safety, and death. In this vein, consider how Jack MacCloud, a 49-year-old high-level Forest Service supervisor, responded when I asked him how he stayed safe during his 13 years on the fireline: “Just lucky I guess. But you make your own luck a lot of times. . . . Like, take Rick Lupe, for example.” During a prescribed burning operation in a nearby forest, Rick Lupe, a 43-year-old supervisor of an elite firefighting unit, was burned over on May 14, 2003; he would die from his injuries roughly a month later. “Here he goes on a *dang prescribed burn*, and uh, shit, makes



a mistake, basically. And costs him his life. And, he just wasn't so lucky that time. And, you know, we didn't get to talk to him or ask him any questions, so what happened for sure, who knows? . . . So he didn't make any luck for himself that day. . . . The bottom line is that when we are out there fighting fires, we're responsible for our own safety, and we have to make good decisions."

This idea, as MacCloud said, is the "bottom line" of the Forest Service's thinking. If a firefighter falters, it is his own mistake. If he is injured, it is due to his lapse of judgment. This hearty emphasis on personal responsibility undergirds the Ten and Eighteen as well. The Orders say very little about teamwork or communication, reinforcing an emphasis on individual competence much more than cohesion or solidarity—qualities that infuse the necessarily collective act of firefighting. As the authors of a training brochure put it, "Each of the 10 Standard Orders are prefaced by the silent imperative 'YOU,' meaning the on-the-ground firefighters, the person who is putting her or his life on the line!"

### What Is Risk to a Firefighter?

If we acknowledge that the Ten and Eighteen are "ideally possible but practically unattainable" (Manning 1971, p. 240)—it is impossible to fight a wildfire without violating at least one Order or Situation—then we reasonably would expect firefighters to look on these rules with suspicion. . . . Although seasonal firefighters sometimes criticized the Ten and Eighteen whereas permanent supervisors were more reluctant to do so, every member of the Forest Service who I met valued these mandates. Consider, for example, how Bryan Keeton, a 22-year-old fourth-season firefighter, answered a brief sequence of Thurman's questions.

"Mr. Keeton," Thurman bellowed in the conference room.

"Yes sir," Bryan answered.

"If you go out here on a fire and get hurt, who's responsible for it?"

"I am!"

"Are they [the Forest Service] going to do anything to me if y'all go out there and get killed?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's our responsibility."

Although one might think Bryan was providing exactly what the boss wanted to hear, when I asked Bryan on a separate occasion, when we were alone, if injured or deceased firefighters could be said to have faltered in a serious way, his response was strikingly consistent: "Yeah, I mean, you look at the research now, and they give you the Ten and Eighteen, and I'm not trying to sound like Thurman here, but the research that they have shows that something was broke among those guidelines."

Peter Ferguson, a 27-year-old engine operator, employed a similar logic when making sense of firefighting fatalities: "When they *do* kill people, and they look in the investigations, that's the first thing they look at: the Ten and Eighteen. They look at how many they broke. Almost always: no look-outs, no escape routes, no safety zones, no communication. . . . They don't have to look any further than that. It was right there in what they'd been taught."

If crewmembers believe in the Ten and Eighteen even though it is impossible to fight a wildfire without violating some of the Orders and Situations, it is because they have internalized the *organizational common sense* of the Forest Service—the set of unquestioned assumptions beneath organizational behavior and dialogue, tacitly agreed on by members of that organization, that buttresses organizational orthodoxy and ensures consensus between members of the organization. The degree to which individuals comply with the practices and doctrines of an organization depends, above all, on the degree to which they accept the elementary set of givens, the unspoken common code, that makes organizational thinking and behavior possible.



Once crewmembers accept the organizational common sense of the Forest Service, they begin to develop a disposition toward firefighting, a disposition through which they place their faith in their individual abilities alone. And if they are competent, so goes the logic, if they know and observe the Ten and Eighteen, they have nothing to fear from fire. What is surprising about the moments when firefighters do doubt their ability is not the doubt itself—a reaction that seems completely reasonable given their opponent—but the rarity of such moments. Although there are times when they are more cautious, firefighters usually march forward with marked confidence. And this is because, although they recognize that fire is not completely within their control, they believe they can rely on their knowledge to steer clear of the deadly flames. George elaborates: “To a point you can control all fire, but in some cases, like last year with the Rodeo-Chediski, that fire was burning so hot, nothing we could do was going to put an immediate stop to that fire. . . . That’s one of those cases where you know that if you get in front of it, even on the sides of it, I mean, you’re gonna get hurt. . . . So, to a point on fires, you can stop it in certain ways, but when it’s burning hot, there’s really nothing you can do.”

“Were you scared during the Rodeo fire?” I ask.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Cause, personally, I don’t consider my life in danger. I think that the people I work with and with the knowledge I know, my life isn’t in danger. . . . If you know, as a firefighter, how to act on a fire, how to approach it, this and that, I mean you’re, yeah, fire can hurt you. But if, you know, if you can soak up the stuff that has been taught to you, it’s *not* a dangerous job.”

At the center of the logic of firefighting, therefore, lies not the lust for danger, or even the recognition of danger, but a kind of disposition or *illusio* of self-determinacy (cf. Goffman 1967, p. 184), a

disposition molded by the organizational common sense of the Forest Service that erases the perils of their profession. As Kris put it, “But if you go in with an emphasis on really being alert and really trying to be able to accept if not control your situation and respond to that situation, then I believe you are perfectly safe.”

Guided by this belief, crewmembers disrespect firefighters who value bravery over prudence, who think with their guts instead of their heads. Despising the rash paladin, they believe aggression and courage to be *negative* qualities in firefighters. When I asked Donald Montoya, a 22-year-old firefighter in his fourth season, what qualities define a good firefighter, he responded: “Common sense, a great big one. . . . And, I mean, it’s pretty cut-and-dried what’s going to happen . . . so you have to have that common sense.”

“ . . . Have you had an example where you were on a fire or in a sticky situation where you felt that this person, you wouldn’t want to listen to that person?”

“Yes, I have had that. We’ll be fighting fire, and a tree will be torching, and you say, ‘Ok, let’s move back,’ and someone’s saying, ‘No.’ The other person is thinking about it, you can see the wheels working in their head, saying, ‘Hmmm,’ and the person’s saying, ‘We can do it! We can do it!’ And you say, ‘No. Let’s get the *hell* out of here!’ . . . That’s just someone saying, ‘Yeah, I think we can do it.’ But you’re saying, ‘I *seriously* doubt it.’”

Donald does not respect the fearless but fears those who disrespect fire. His crewmembers feel the same way. If the men at Elk River prize competence above all else and perform masculinity through displays of cool-headed skill and restraint in the face of danger—not acts of daring, as previous theories have predicted—it is because they come to understand their enemy as undeserving of their courage. The Forest Service does not train firefighters to be confident when facing wildfire; it trains firefighters to perceive wildfire as something so harmless (for the competent and capable) that confidence is superfluous.



### The Death of a Firefighter

It would be unproblematic for firefighters to maintain that their job lacked danger if no one were ever hurt or killed. But what happens when the body of an experienced firefighter is “burned beyond recognition” and is brought before firefighters? The death of a firefighter poses a significant problem for the organizational common sense of the Forest Service because at first glance it seems to contradict its fundamental tenet: that fire is safe and controllable, that properly trained firefighters should never incur harm on the fireline. If the Forest Service strives to cultivate within firefighters a disposition of self-determinancy, how does the organization react when this disposition faces its biggest challenge, the death of a firefighter?

### Two Eulogies

After Rick Lupe died, the familiar public announcements that usually follow the death of a “public servant” commenced (cf. Goode 1978). Newspaper articles explained this “warrior’s” death, this “hero’s” fall, as the result of a powerful force of nature and nothing else; flags flown over state buildings were lowered to a half-mast; the Fort Apache Indian Tribe declared a month-long mourning period; and Lupe was named “Firefighter of the Year.” This *external eulogy* was the one most people witnessed after Lupe died. The Forest Service presided over many of the ceremonies that constituted the external eulogy, but it also presided over another kind of eulogy, one observed by those who must return to the line the next day. This *internal eulogy* served a wholly different function and constructed an entirely different picture than the external one.

Fifteen days after Lupe was burned, Ronald Crasser, the head forest supervisor, traveled to Elk River to hold a safety meeting. Among other things, Crasser discussed Lupe’s burn-over. After explaining vague bits and pieces of the scenario on Sawtooth, he remarked, “There are some things he did wrong, uh, but we don’t know what it was because we can’t talk to him.”

Similarly, Jack MacCloud, as I mentioned earlier, speculated that Lupe’s mistakes resulted in him not making “enough luck” for himself on the fireline. And Thurman, for his part, often presided over internal eulogies with statements like this one, tendered shortly after receiving word of two fatalities: “Whether the pilot was at error or the weather contributed, the pilot still should have known better. With the fire in Idaho, if you look at the report, it shows that *they blew it!*” The external eulogy holds firefighters to be innocent victims whose altruistic and sacrificial deaths can be explained simply by the violent and volatile nature of wildfire. The internal eulogy holds them to be failures whose fully preventable deaths were the outcome of incompetence.

In the case of Rick Lupe, Crasser and MacCloud assumed that the findings of the fatality report would support their predictions that Lupe was responsible for his burns. A careful reading of the *Sawtooth Mountain Prescribed Fire Burnover Fatality Factual Report*, however, reveals that Lupe conducted most of his actions by the book. If this is the case, then why did the supervisors claim that he erred? To answer this question, we must examine the unfolding processes through which the Forest Service manages death—dynamics that come into view after close examination of official documents.

### Processing Death

After any firefighting fatality, and many nonfatal entrapments, an interstate and interagency team of fire behavior analysts, safety officers, chief investigators, and fire operations specialists is dispatched to investigate. Each team bases its investigation on guidelines established in manuals distributed by the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, and the Bureau of Land Management. Its job is to identify the causes of the accident and to generate recommendations that one hopes will help prevent future incidents. . . .

Although such accident investigation handbooks stress the importance of different factors, they devote significantly more attention (and pages)



to people causes than to the other types. Moreover, accident investigation manuals not only coach investigators to downplay management, equipment, and environment causes, they also instruct them to think about these factors as somehow linked to people causes. One guidebook directs: "Environmental causes occasionally are the cause of an accident. A lightning strike is the classic example. When this occurs, look for human errors that may have exposed the employee to the environmental hazard." Therefore, if investigative teams follow the instructions set down in their manuals, they will ardently look, while scrutinizing the burn scene, for evidence of incompetence by the dead or injured.

Given this, it is not surprising that many fatality reports focus on the incompetence of the dead, manifest in violations of the Ten and Eighteen. However, all 21 fatality and injury reports that I analyzed also identified management, equipment, or environment factors as consequential causes of the accident . . .

Sometimes, however, what matters is not the message but the messenger. Because, as one accident investigation handbook instructs, "it is imperative that information about specific entrapments and the 'Lessons Learned' from these situations be disseminated to all firefighters in a thorough and timely manner," information about fatalities is speedily circulated throughout the wildland firefighting community once the investigation is concluded. . . . Despite the emphasis fatality reports place on the role of poor leadership, broken equipment, or extreme environmental conditions, in the truncated reports these causes regularly (though not always) fade into the background (and sometimes out of existence), while the mistakes of firefighters and low-level supervisors are accentuated. The news release that followed the Thirtymile fire, for example, listed only five "key conclusions" about the causes of the four fatalities: "There were inadequate fire and safety briefings; potential for extreme fire behavior was not accurately assessed; firefighters disregarded 'watch out' situations and the ten fire fighting rules; fire suppression tactics

were not reassessed once problems arose during the incident; and there was inadequate preparation for the deployment of fire shelters."

Trimming and erasing continues as this institutional message makes its way into training pamphlets and other official handbooks distributed throughout firefighting organizations. These documents (regularly read by firefighters and assigned in training classes) overlook all other causes and treat people causes as the leading *and only* causes of accidents. The authors of a 14-page booklet on fatalities observe, "Many of the wildland fire fatalities from burnovers can be directly attributed to the failure to follow the basic guidelines that are the basis for all wildland fire strategy and tactics: 10 Standard Fire Orders, 18 Situations that Shout 'Watch Out.' . . . Self-discipline can reduce fatalities." Another document, which I acquired during basic training, boldly makes the same case: "Fire shelter deployments have always been attributed to violations of the Ten Standard Fire Orders or the Eighteen Situations that Shout Watch Out. . . . [W]hen we violate basic safety standards and rules—bad things happen! . . . There is no excuse for not doing what we are trained to do, yet we continue to do just that."

We can therefore identify four stages in the organizational process of managing death: *investigation*, in which a team of professionals advances several factors that led to the fatality, including managerial, equipment, and environmental causes; *dissemination*, in which trimming occurs, as fatalities often are attributed to the mistakes of firefighters and low-level supervisors; *generalization*, in which trimming continues, as causes of accidents are reduced to people causes and universal claims about the incompetence of the dead are advanced in widely-circulated training materials and small handbooks; and, finally, *reproduction*, in which the organization's elite reinforce the internal eulogy of the Forest Service. The multifarious and complex causal factors behind fatalities presented in investigative reports are filtered through the individualizing screen of self-determinancy, and this sanitizing



process produces only one clear, consistent, and convincing cause: incompetence of the dead. As we already have seen, some crewmembers would agree with supervisors in perceiving fallen firefighters as incompetents. . . .

#### **“The Fault Lays on Everybody”**

“Listen up,” said Allen, the 55-year-old Elk River supervisor, to a restless firecrew sprawled around the conference room table. “This just came in from over there in Jameson. It’s a ‘critique of the incident’ about two firefighters that died, uh, died up in Idaho.”

He put on his bifocals and squinted as he pulled the white pages closer to his face. He began: “During the afternoon of July 22, 2003, an incident occurred on the Cramer fire. . . . Two firefighters were involved in the incident resulting in two fatalities. . . . At this time, we cannot confirm what took place but will do so as soon as it becomes available. . . . The Cramer fire . . . is burning in extremely steep terrain on the Salmon River front . . . extreme fire behavior was experienced causing ‘blow-up’ conditions.” . . .

“That sucks,” J.J. said.

“Someone fucked up,” Donald responded. “I’ll tell you what happened: Someone fucked up.” Heads nodded.

Craig Neilson, a 45-year-old fire prevention officer, added, “Their communications might have been fucked. . . . The fire was under them and burned up.”

“They probably weren’t paying attention,” Donald said.

“Were they informed on the current weather conditions?” Craig wondered out loud.

“They’re probably stupid. Probably weren’t talking to their crew,” Peter guessed.

“Yep. They’re fuckin’ stupid, not talking to anyone. They should’ve known better than to build a helispot [a makeshift landing spot for helicopters] on top of the fire,” said Donald.

Heads continued to nod, and crewmembers soon shifted their attention to another topic. No one spoke a word about the incident for the rest of the day.

When news of the Cramer fire reached my crewmembers, most did not resist the internal eulogy of the Forest Service but participated in it. Although Craig suggested that communication and command failure may have led to the entrapment, Donald and Peter quickly shifted the blame back onto the shoulders of the dead. In this instance, crewmembers transformed equipment causes (“*Their communications might have been fucked*”) and management causes (“*Were they informed on the current weather conditions?*”) into people causes (“*They’re fuckin’ stupid, not talking to anyone*”).

Although some firefighters entertain suspicions of powerlessness in the face of wildfire (Peter once told me: “They teach us all this stuff, and what if you do have your communications in place? . . . What if shit just fucking goes nuts?”), suggesting the Forest Service should blame less, the majority inclined in the opposite direction. Steve, for example, wanted the Forest Service to blame up, holding administrators responsible for putting firefighters in deadly situations: “If it goes wrong . . . [crewmembers] gonna be at fault, but who put them in that position? . . . If you [a supervisor] go down there, and you think it’s safe, you put ‘em down there, it’s your fault. . . . The fault lays on *everybody*. . . . It’s like Thurman was saying, ‘You’re responsible for your own safety.’ . . . The supervisor should have more responsibility for what happened. But these [crewmembers] aren’t stupid.”

“ . . . So if someone dies on a fire, they probably made a serious mistake?” I asked.

“Serious mistakes? I mean, people make the same mistakes on other fires and get away with it, and some people make those same mistakes and they end up getting killed. . . . What’s always *really bugged me* is they say . . . to follow these Ten and Eighteen, and *this one* was violated, *this one* was violated, and *this one* was violated. That’s because on those Ten and Eighteen . . . *no matter what* . . . they can say that you violated one of those. There’s not been *one* instance where some of those wasn’t violated.” He lowered his voice. “And still, I don’t



think they really preach those enough. I mean, obviously, those are basically everything in the fire."

### Erasing Risk by Exaggerating Deviance

Although Steve observed that violations of the Ten and Eighteen can be documented everywhere for anything—which suggests they are vacuous—he went on to reaffirm the importance of these fire-fighting fundamentals by arguing that the Forest Service should stress the Ten and Eighteen even more. J. J.'s reasoning exhibited a similarly circular pattern. "You can't put the blame on one certain person because, as firefighters, we know what to look for," he told me regarding Thirtymile. "And as supervisors, they know what to look for. And there were a lot of the Ten and Eighteen that were broken. But why didn't the firefighters, uh, so why *did* the firefighters break them? I know they were tired, fatigued, but I wouldn't use that as a reason or excuse to say, 'Hey, the supervisors *burned them up*,' because it's as much our job to see what's going on as it is theirs. . . . You know, I trust *one person* and that's myself. It's *all* their fault, from the people that burned up to the supervisors." . . .

"Right, but have you ever been in a fire where the Ten and Eighteen were broken?" I asked.

"Can't say that I have."

"On *every* fire that you've been on, has there been a lookout?"

"No. I think on a lot of fires they don't post lookouts. I think more than half the time they don't post lookouts on the fires."

"So does that violate a Fire Order?"

"I guess it does. It does. Lookouts not established or whatever."

"Do you think that you'd ever know if instructions were not given clearly or understood?" I questioned, referring to the fourth Fire Order.

"At the time it happened, if it actually didn't concern me, I don't think I would."

"So would you concede, then, that you've been on fires where Fire Orders were broken?"

"I guess I'd say I would, more than once. And we are breaking them too!"

"On the Beaver Creek fire, we must have broken like ten of the Eighteen, dude," I disclosed, regarding a fire in which my crewmembers and I had to drop our tools and run.

"No joke?"

"No joke."

"You're lucky that they didn't burn anybody up, you know. I guess it probably happens a lot like that in the Forest Service. I bet more than 90% of the time you're probably breaking a Fire Order on a fire, but you don't hear about it if somebody doesn't die, you know."

"So why do you think we have the Ten and Eighteen?"

"For reason to fall back on," J. J. observed. "Say somebody got burned, well, there's an excuse. 'Oh, it was broke,' you know. 'That's why they burned up, 'cause they broke the Ten and Eighteen.' It's an excuse to fall back on. You'll never hear them say, you know, so and so burned up, you know, because of the *truth*. They're not gonna say, 'Well this person burned because *we fucked up*.' They are gonna say, 'Ah, they burned because there are all these rules, and they didn't abide by the rules, therefore he burned.' They're not gonna admit *they* messed up, you know. No, they are gonna find an excuse. That way, they can get their ass out of trouble."

J. J.'s views resembled a labyrinth of mirrors that always reflect back on that which is most familiar. In no more than 2 minutes, J. J. claimed always to abide by the Ten and Eighteen, retracted that claim by guessing that these fundamentals are violated on most fires, placed his faith once again in the Ten and Eighteen in response to my observation about the Beaver Creek fire, then renounced his newfound faith by describing the Ten and Eighteen as empty rules useful only to supervisors for insurance purposes.

When J. J., Steve, and other crewmembers tried to resist the common sense of the Forest Service—when they attempted to challenge the thought categories provided them through all the vehicles of organizational socialization—they quickly discovered that their universe made little sense. To be



sure, they did not accept the common sense of the Forest Service without raising skeptical questions and retaining stubborn doubts, but they accepted it nonetheless, because without it fire is a dangerous chaos.

By exaggerating individual deviance, the Forest Service erases risk. This allows firefighters to rub out the dangers of their occupation by concluding that firefighting is dangerous only for the idiotic and the irresponsible. Firefighters are trained to distance themselves from fallen friends and crewmembers (thereby avoiding the consternation that results when one slips his feet into the shoes of a corpse) and instead to clutch onto the belief that, as George once put it, "people are gonna die, but just because *stuff happens*, I mean, it doesn't necessarily mean it's gonna happen to *you*."

### Discussion

Firefighters prize competence and control above all other attributes and (contrary to most accounts) view aggression and courage as negative qualities. The distinctive mark of a good firefighter is his ability to know—not to test—his limits. Far from understanding risk as an avenue to a euphoric "adrenaline rush" or a route to acquiring masculine character, firefighters are socialized to view risk as something that can be tamed, safety as something for which they are personally responsible, and death as completely avoidable through competence. . . . [T]he Forest Service acclimates firefighters to the perils of their profession by cultivating within them a belief that their job is no more dangerous than the next. When this belief meets its ultimate challenge—the death of a firefighter—the Forest Service reacts by minimizing hazards and exaggerating deviance, thereby allowing firefighters to distance themselves from the dead and the objective dangers of their job.

### The Selective Mimesis of Organizations

As organizational structure is grafted into the social structure, organizational processes of socialization

are grounded in processes of socialization at work within society writ large (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott and Meyer 1994). Although organizational socialization never can be completely disentangled from cultural socialization, an organization can *select* which aspects of the larger culture it wishes to mimic, endorsing certain elements while rejecting others. The Forest Service chooses from a vast repertoire of culturally-appropriate responses to death and selects certain principles (individualism, self-reliance) over others (solidarity, collectivism, honor) when crafting a firefighter's illusion of self-determinancy. Sometimes it connects to different cultural principles depending on its aims: Whereas the external eulogy gains meaning by connecting to widespread convictions of symbolic honor and masculine sacrifice, convictions linked to ideas of nationalism and heroism, the internal eulogy borrows from ideas of American individualism, autonomy, and responsibility. Through the former, the Forest Service maintains legitimacy with the surrounding community; through the latter, it hopes to gain legitimacy in the eyes of its workers.

Thus, the Forest Service provides firefighters with a cognitive winnowing device, a "focus of attention" (March and Simon 1958, p. 152), that espouses a definite response to death (one that harmonizes with American individualism), while discouraging others (which would correspond to equally appropriate cultural beliefs). Indeed, if this were not the case, if firefighters naturally and effortlessly came to such conclusions about risk and death, why would the organization need to dedicate so much effort and so many resources to socializing its workers to think in such a fashion? . . .

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### Reflective Questions

1. What social challenges does the U.S. Forest Service have to overcome in order to produce willing and able firefighters? What other professions share those challenges? What are the Ten and Eighteen, and how do they address the dangers confronted by firefighters? What does Desmond mean when he says that firefighters make their own luck?
2. How did trainers ensure that firefighters knew and understood the Ten and Eighteen? What was the disposition of trained firefighters? How did firefighters view the organizational common sense and risk-taking? Why?
3. Desmond argues that the deaths of firefighters posed a serious challenge to the organizational logic of firefighting. How so? What are “people causes”? How prominent were “people causes” in death investigations versus management, environmental, or equipment causes? What were the four stages in the organizational approach to managing death? Why was resisting the organizational approach problematic for firefighters?
4. How do people pass along institutional logics to new people? What institutional tools do people use? What incentivizes people to go along with and adopt the logic? Why are people so compliant?





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5. What happens when people challenge the prevailing interactional order of an institution? How do others respond? For example, what happens when political candidates (e.g., Donald Trump or Ted Cruz at the 2016 Republican National Convention) fail to play by the rules?

What happens when college students do? Consider the case of Black Lives Matter protests that have swept across college campuses. How do protestors challenge the interactional order? Who tries to keep protesting students in line? How? What resources do they use to do so?





PART  
VII

# The Construction of Social Boundaries and Structures

The selections in the previous section examined how the “interaction order” profoundly influences people’s understandings, experiences, relationships, and actions. Part VII shows how people coordinate their interpretations and actions in ways that lead to broader social patterns. One recurrent pattern involves social boundaries: symbolically dividing people into groups and protecting those boundaries. We make and remake social boundaries when we repeatedly categorize people and attach particular meanings to those groupings. We then act on categorizations so that the divisions between people have social consequences: we interact differently with people based on their classifications, we consider some people to be like us and others to be different from us, we know how to think about ourselves and how to act because we see ourselves as members of one group (e.g., students) and not another (e.g., professors). Social boundaries are the basis for social roles and positions within society. They give us a sense of identity, purpose, and direction.

Another pattern involves our ways of organizing the social world, often referred to as social structures. Social structures allow us to anticipate what others will do and what they expect us to do, often in ways consistent with social roles or positions defined through symbolic boundaries. They provide us with interactional





predictability and stability. For this reason, social structures often seem self-perpetuating and permanent, as if they exist in their own right, external to us and outside of our interactions. They may also appear to be independent forces shaping our lives by constraining some actions and enabling others. In these ways, social structures can feel as natural as physical environments. But their power does not come from nature; it comes from human definitions and coordinated actions. Social structures are humanly created and recreated through interaction. The selections in this section examine the interactional establishment, maintenance, and reconstruction of various types of symbolic boundaries and social structures.

Taken together, the readings in Part VII highlight the following themes about collective symbolic interaction:

- *Sociologists use terms such as institutions, cultures, and social structures as shorthand to refer to individuals engaging in symbolic interaction in repeated and coordinated ways.* While social structures seem as if they exist in their own right, they do not. Ultimately, they rely on human action and interaction. As Herbert Blumer noted, social structures are the product of “joint action” (see Selection 28). Because joint actions are grounded in social meanings and definitions, they have a contingent nature and are potentially open to challenge and change at any time.

Guided by Blumer’s insights, a sociological psychological approach to social boundaries and structures has profound implications for how we think about and study the social world. It shifts the analytic eye from the *by-product* of joint action to the *process* of meaning making that produces and sustains it. This framework diminishes the mystique of social structures: they seem much less stable, constraining, and daunting. As Blumer explains in Selection 28, it is “the social process in group life that creates and upholds the rules, not the rules that create and uphold group life.”

- *We maintain symbolic boundaries between people, and we use these boundaries to coordinate our actions with others.* Symbolic boundaries allow us to develop meaningful identities as they relate to being part of a group or taking on a particular social role. People often create and reinforce social boundaries in order to make claims about their morality: that they are part of a morally superior and worthy group. Managing emotions is one way of drawing boundaries. But a particular boundary is neither permanent nor necessary.
- *Other people provide us a model for how to coordinate our interpretations and actions, and they police our actions to be consistent with their expectations.* We hold each other accountable by approving of some ways of acting and







disapproving of others. Moreover, we coordinate accountability with others to create broader social networks of actors.

- *People often find comfort and direction from routines.* We know what to do in a given situation because we have done it before successfully or because others expect it from people of our position. We know what it means to be a worker or a husband. We feel good about ourselves and the world around us because we know where we fit.
- *When the unexpected disrupts our routines, however, we feel unsettled, uncertain, and even threatened.* Our sense of stability and moral order gets shaken. People respond to these challenges by protecting established routines and maintaining control of the situation. They use a variety of techniques to keep things going according to plan. These techniques include minimizing disruptions, following rituals, using humor to create emotional distance in the face of traumatic events, or simply keeping going by focusing on one's assigned tasks. Personal crises, chaotic workplaces, and dramatic weather events disrupt everyday routines and thus are ripe places for examining how people strive to sustain social order in the face of profound disruption.
- *We often contest boundaries and try to draw new lines and ways of organizing people.* The expansion and contraction of boundaries are consequential for people. Social labels and social roles come with real benefits and costs: financial, emotional, psychological. Thus, groups have a vested interest in drawing boundaries in particular ways. With so much at stake, people often intentionally work to change how we organize the social world.

Each of the readings in Part VII reminds us that we organize and structure our own social lives. While some of us may influence those processes more than others, we all participate. And because we participate in the construction of symbolic boundaries and social structures, we can also change them.





## Society in Action

HERBERT BLUMER

Herbert Blumer was an important proponent and contributor to the sociological perspective of "symbolic interactionism," a name that he himself gave to it. This approach to the study of social life grew out of George Herbert Mead's ideas about the human self, thought, and interaction. As you may recall, Mead argued that individuals interact with themselves much as they interact with one another. They continually engage in an inner conversation. Rather than blindly responding, they define and interpret their experience. Their action and interaction is symbolic and meaningful.

Blumer argues that the study of social life must start from Mead's basic insights. Human social life is a continual process of individual and collective definition and interpretation. Society, culture, and social structure are not static things but are derived from what people do. And what people do is engage in symbolic interaction, both with one another and with themselves. Through processes of definition and interpretation, humans fit their individual lines of action together and construct joint actions. As Blumer further argues, students of social life cannot afford to ignore the fact that even the action of such human collectivities as societies, nations, and organizations are based on processes of definition, interpretation, and symbolic interaction.

Blumer draws three lessons about the study of social life from this basic insight. First, no matter how stable and orderly, social life is always subject to

the "play and fate of meaning." Recurrent patterns of interaction and collective action are based on definitions and interpretations that may change unpredictably. Second, the networks of joint action that are often called "social institutions" are not self-governing and self-sustaining entities but rather are sustained by human interaction and are governed by human definition and interpretation. Third, the construction of joint action is based on understandings and meanings that emerge from prior interaction. No matter how new they may seem, they have a history. These are the specifications of Blumer's more general lesson: social structures, cultures, institutions, and societies exist only in human action and interaction. Thus, human action and interaction are what students of social life must ultimately study.

Human groups . . . [consist] of human beings who are engaging in action. The action consists of the multitudinous activities that the individuals perform in their lives as they encounter one another and as they deal with the succession of situations confronting them. The individuals may act singly, they may act collectively, and they may act on behalf of, or as representatives of, some organization or group of others. The activities belong to the acting individuals and are carried on by them always with regard to the situations in which they have to act. The import of this simple

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and essentially redundant characterization is that fundamentally human groups or society *exists in action* and must be seen in terms of action. This picture of human society as action must be the starting point (and the point of return) for any scheme that purports to treat and analyze human society empirically. Conceptual schemes that depict society in some other fashion can only be derivations from the complex of ongoing activity that constitutes group life. This is true of the two dominant conceptions of society in contemporary sociology—that of culture and that of social structure. Culture as a conception, whether defined as custom, tradition, norm, value, rules, or such like, is clearly derived from what people do. Similarly, social structure in any of its aspects, as represented by such terms as social position, status, role, authority, and prestige, refers to relationships derived from how people act toward each other. The life of any human society consists necessarily of an ongoing process of fitting together the activities of its members. It is this complex of ongoing activity that establishes and portrays structure or organization. . . .

The central place and importance of symbolic interaction in human group life and conduct should be apparent. A human society or group consists of people in association. Such association exists necessarily in the form of people acting toward one another and thus engaging in social interaction. Such interaction in human society is characteristically and predominantly on the symbolic level; as individuals acting individually, collectively, or as agents of some organization encounter one another, they are necessarily required to take account of the actions of one another as they form their own action. They do this by a dual process of indicating to others how to act and of interpreting the indications made by others. Human group life is a vast process of such defining to others what to do and of interpreting their definitions; through this process, people come to fit their activities to one another and to form their own individual conduct. Both such joint activity and individual

conduct are formed *in* and *through* this ongoing process; they are not mere expressions or products of what people bring to their interaction or of conditions that are antecedent to their interaction. The failure to accommodate to this vital point constitutes the fundamental deficiency of schemes that seek to account for human society in terms of social organization or psychological factors, or of any combination of the two. By virtue of symbolic interaction, human group life is necessarily a formative process and not a mere arena for the expression of pre-existing factors.

[H]uman beings must have a makeup that fits the nature of social interaction. The human being is . . . an organism that not only responds to others on the non-symbolic level but as one that makes indications to others and interprets their indications. He can do this, as Mead has shown so emphatically, only by virtue of possessing a "self." Nothing esoteric is meant by this expression. It means merely that a human being can be an object of his own action. Thus, he can recognize himself, for instance, as being a man, young in age, a student, in debt, trying to become a doctor, coming from an undistinguished family, and so forth. In all such instances, he is an object to himself; and he acts toward himself and guides himself in his actions toward others on the basis of the kind of object he is to himself. . . .

[T]he fact that the human being has a self . . . enables him to interact with himself. This interaction is not in the form of interaction between two or more parts of a psychological system, as between needs, or between emotions, or between ideas, or between the id and the ego in the Freudian scheme. Instead, the interaction is social—a form of communication, with the person addressing himself as a person and responding thereto. We can clearly recognize such interaction in ourselves, as each of us notes that he is angry with himself, or that he has to spur himself on in his tasks, or that he reminds himself to do this or that, or that he is talking to himself in working out some plan of action. As such instances suggest, self-interaction exists



fundamentally as a process of making indications to oneself. . . .

The capacity of the human being to make indications to himself gives a distinctive character to human action. It means that the human individual confronts a world that he must interpret in order to act instead of an environment to which he responds because of his organization. He has to cope with the situations in which he is called on to act, ascertaining the meaning of the actions of others and mapping out his own line of action in the light of such interpretation. He has to construct and guide his action instead of merely releasing it in response to factors playing on him or operating through him. He may do a miserable job in constructing his action, but he has to construct it. . . .

This view of human action applies equally well to joint or collective action, in which numbers of individuals are implicated. Joint or collective action constitutes the domain of sociological concern, as exemplified in the behavior of groups, institutions, organizations, and social classes. Such instances of societal behavior, whatever they may be, consist of individuals fitting their lines of action to one another. It is both proper and possible to view and study such behavior in its joint or collective character instead of in its individual components. Such joint behavior does not lose its character of being constructed through an interpretive process in meeting the situations in which the collectivity is called on to act. Whether the collectivity be an army engaged in a campaign, a corporation seeking to expand its operations, or a nation trying to correct an unfavorable balance of trade, it needs to construct its action through an interpretation of what is happening in its area of operation. The interpretive process takes place by participants making indications to one another, not merely each to himself. Joint or collective action is an outcome of such a process of interpretative interaction.

As stated earlier, human group life consists of, and exists in, the fitting of lines of action to each other by the members of the group. Such articulation of lines of action gives rise to and constitutes

"joint action"—a societal organization of conduct of different acts of diverse participants. A joint action, while made up of diverse component acts that enter into its formation, is different from any one of them and from their mere aggregation. The joint action has a distinctive character in its own right, a character that lies in the articulation or linkage as apart from what may be articulated or linked. Thus, the joint action may be identified as such and may be spoken of and handled without having to break it down into the separate acts that comprise it. This is what we do when we speak of such things as marriage, a trading transaction, war, a parliamentary discussion, or a church service. Similarly, we can speak of the collectivity that engages in joint action without having to identify the individual members of that collectivity, as we do in speaking of a family, a business corporation, a church, a university, or a nation. . . .

In dealing with collectivities and with joint action, one can easily be trapped in an erroneous position by failing to recognize that the joint action of the collectivity is an interlinkage of the separate acts of the participants. This failure leads one to overlook the fact that a joint action always has to undergo a process of formation; even though it may be a well-established and repetitive form of social action, each instance of it has to be formed anew. Further, this career of formation through which it comes into being necessarily takes place through the dual process of designation and interpretation that was discussed above. The participants still have to guide their respective acts by forming and using meanings.

With these remarks as a background, I wish to make three observations on the implications of the interlinkage that constitutes joint action. I wish to consider first those instances of joint action that are repetitive and stable. The preponderant portion of social action in a human society, particularly in a settled society, exists in the form of recurrent patterns of joint action. In most situations in which people act toward one another, they have in advance a firm understanding of how to act and of



how other people will act. They share common and pre-established meanings of what is expected in the action of the participants, and accordingly each participant is able to guide his own behavior by such meanings. Instances of repetitive and pre-established forms of joint action are so frequent and common that it is easy to understand why scholars have viewed them as the essence or natural form of human group life. Such a view is especially apparent in the concepts of "culture" and "social order" that are so dominant in social-science literature. Most sociological schemes rest on the belief that a human society exists in the form of an established order of living, with that order resolvable into adherence to sets of rules, norms, values, and sanctions that specify to people how they are to act in their different situations.

Several comments are in order with regard to this neat scheme. First, it is just not true that the full expanse of life in a human society, any human society, is but an expression of pre-established forms of joint action. New situations are constantly arising within the scope of group life that are problematic and for which existing rules are inadequate. I have never heard of any society that was free of problems nor any society in which members did not have to engage in discussion to work out ways of action. Such areas of unprescribed conduct are just as natural, indigenous, and recurrent in human group life as are those areas covered by pre-established and faithfully followed prescriptions of joint action. Second, we have to recognize that even in the case of pre-established and repetitive joint action, each instance of such joint action has to be formed anew. The participants still have to build up their lines of action and fit them to one another through the dual process of designation and interpretation. They do this in the case of repetitive joint action, of course, by using the same recurrent and constant meanings. If we recognize this, we are forced to realize that the play and fate of meanings are what is important, not the joint action in its established form.

Repetitive and stable joint action is just as much a result of an interpretative process as is a new form of joint action that is being developed for the first time. This is not an idle or pedantic point; the meanings that underlie established and recurrent joint action are themselves subject to pressure as well as to reinforcement, to incipient dissatisfaction as well as to indifference; they may be challenged as well as affirmed, allowed to slip along without concern as well as subjected to infusions of new vigor. Behind the facade of the objectively perceived joint action, the set of meanings that sustains that joint action has a life that the social scientists can ill afford to ignore. A gratuitous acceptance of the concepts of norms, values, social rules, and the like should not blind [us] to the fact that any one of them is subtended by a process of social interaction—a process that is necessary not only for their change but equally well for their retention in a fixed form. It is the social process in group life that creates and upholds the rules, not the rules that create and uphold group life.

The second observation on the interlinkage that constitutes joint action refers to the extended connection of actions that make up so much of human group life. We are familiar with these large complex networks of action involving an interlinkage and interdependency of diverse actions of diverse people—as in the division of labor extending from the growing of grain by the farmer to an eventual sale of bread in a store, or in the elaborate chain extending from the arrest of a suspect to his eventual release from a penitentiary. These networks with their regularized participation of diverse people by diverse action at diverse points yields a picture of institutions that have been appropriately a major concern of sociologists. They also give substance to the idea that human group life has the character of a system. In seeing such a large complex of diversified activities, all hanging together in a regularized operation, and in seeing the complementary organization of participants in well-knit interdependent relationships, it is easy to understand why so



many scholars view such networks or institutions as self-operating entities, following their own dynamics and not requiring that attention be given to the participants within the network. Most of the sociological analyses of institutions and social organization adhere to this view. Such adherence, in my judgment, is a serious mistake. One should recognize what is true, namely, that the diverse array of participants, occupying different points in the network, engage in their actions at those points on the basis of using given sets of meanings. A network or an institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamics or system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called on to act. A limited appreciation of this point is reflected today in some of the work on decision-making, but on the whole the point is grossly ignored. It is necessary to recognize that the sets of meanings that lead participants to act as they do at their stationed points in the network have their own setting in a localized process of social interaction—and that these meanings are formed, sustained, weakened, strengthened, or transformed, as the case may be, through a socially defining process. Both the functioning and the fate of institutions are set by this process of interpretation as it takes place among the diverse sets of participants.

A third important observation needs to be made, namely, that any instance of joint action, whether newly formed or long established, has necessarily arisen out of a background of previous actions of the participants. A new kind of joint action never comes into existence apart from such a background. The participants involved in the formation of the new joint action always bring to that formation the world of objects, the sets of meanings, and the schemes of interpretation that they already possess. Thus, the new form of joint action always emerges out of and is connected with a context of previous joint action. . . .

[H]uman society [is] people engaged in living. Such living is a process of ongoing activity in which participants are developing lines of action in the multitudinous situations they encounter. They are caught up in a vast process of interaction in which they have to fit their developing actions to one another. This process of interaction consists in making indications to others of what to do and in interpreting the indications as made by others. . . . This general process should be seen, of course, in the differentiated character which it necessarily has by virtue of the fact that people cluster in different groups, belong to different associations, and occupy different positions. They accordingly approach each other differently, live in different worlds, and guide themselves by different sets of meanings. Nevertheless, whether one is dealing with a family, a boy's gang, an industrial corporation, or a political party, one must see the activities of the collectivity as being formed through a process of designation and interpretation.

### Reflective Questions

1. What is Blumer's definition of "self"? What is the purview of sociologists?
2. What does Blumer mean in saying that society "exists in action"? What is a social institution then? What is "joint action"? How does it work?
3. Blumer argues that it is "the social process in group life that creates and upholds the rules, not the rules that create and uphold group life." What does he mean by this? Blumer is in part problematizing reification. Reification is the failure to recognize the process of formation behind joint action, to treat the by-product of joint action, such as an institution, as if it exists in its own right and acts as a force independent of actors. Why is this problematic for sociological psychologists?
4. The incarceration rate in the United States skyrocketed over the '80s, '90s, and 2000s. The focus in the criminal justice system shifted from rehabilitating offenders to punishing them. The war on drugs, mandatory sentences, privatization





of prisons, and three-strikes rules were all manifestations of the shift. By the end of 2015, according to Kaebler and Glaze ("Correctional Populations in the United States, 2015," *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=5870>), 2.17 million people were incarcerated, and one in thirty-seven U.S. adults were under the supervision of the adult correctional system. Incarceration and supervision are not evenly distributed across the population. According to *The Sentencing Project*, the incarceration rate in 2014 was 275 (all per 100,000 population) for white men, 378 for

Latinos, and 1,408 for black men. What is your reaction to these data? Is this level of incarceration problematic to you? Why or why not? How do you think young black males feel after hearing those statistics? If you are/were a part of this group, how do/would you view the police? The criminal justice system in general? How do people's interpretations of crime translate into punitive social policies and mass incarceration of black men? How does an understanding of joint action shape our personal responsibility for mass incarceration? What actions can individuals take to remedy the situation?





## Autism Spectrum Disorder and the DSM-5

KRISTIN BARKER AND TASHA R. GALARDI

*In Blumer's piece (Selection 28), we saw that sociological psychologists emphasize how we create social institutions and structures by sharing meanings and joint action. In order for our social world to have coherence and stability, then, we must continuously affirm particular ways of thinking and doing things with friends, neighbors, customers, and strangers—in interaction. Sociological psychologists, however, are just as interested in contestation as they are in stability. In reality, we are continuously renegotiating meanings—and so social structures change. In fact, coming to agreement is a difficult and messy process. Social actors often find themselves disagreeing, advocating for a new way of thinking about things, and trying to redirect social action. Of course, we do this negotiating of meanings in everyday interaction with each other. The Internet has opened up a whole new arena for this interaction, making it possible to challenge meanings with people in far-flung cities, states, and even countries.*

*Social categories and boundaries are other dimensions of social organization we often find ourselves contesting. Who should be in and who should be out? The debate over marriage equality offers a recent example of the contestation over boundaries. Even when the Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015 that states must issue same-sex marriage licenses and recognize same-sex marriages from other states, some local officials continued to contest the definition of marriage by refusing to issue licenses.*

*Couples wanting to marry, with the backing of civil liberties and other advocacy groups, then responded with lawsuits—making a broader appeal to the rightness of the complainants' definition of the situation and problematizing the failure of local officials to comply with the Supreme Court's ruling. The cases provoked widespread media coverage and debate on social media. Eventually, the issue was resolved partially by creating a new process for issuing licenses, one which bypassed the objectors. We can see from this example how changing the institution of marriage depended upon local actors agreeing to the court's definition and then acting on it. When that agreement did not come, people collectively debated who was right and developed a new way of thinking about the issue.*

*Medical diagnoses offer another form of social categorization which relies on widespread agreement—and can be hotly contested. Over time, we have subjected more and more human experiences to medical care, a process sociologists refer to as medicalization.*

*During the rewriting of the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the book of diagnostic criteria for mental illnesses, the American Psychiatric Association, which produces the manual, created public forums for discussing new medical categories. The association placed its proposed changes to diagnostic criteria on the Internet*

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and requested feedback from the public. And laypeople sure did respond!

Perhaps most contentious were the proposed changes to the definition of and criteria for diagnosing Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). As we see here in Barker and Galardi's piece, the new manual proposed shrinking the definition of ASD so that fewer people, especially those with Asperger's Syndrome, would be eligible for diagnosis. Their study analyzes newspaper readers' comments in response to proposed changes to ASD, demonstrating how people contest boundaries. Their analysis also reveals what is at stake in having one's perceptions of boundaries affirmed or disconfirmed.

The authors find three areas commentators contested: what is normal or abnormal, whether parents are responsible for their children's abnormal behavior or not, and whether people's behavior warranted using resources to correct or not. Drawing upon their own experiences with ASD individuals, commentators who opposed the changes sought validation of their painful experiences and relief from difficult symptoms, while those in favor opposed the expansion of medical diagnoses and subsequent allocation of finite resources.

... The long-awaited fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) was released in May 2013 at the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Annual Meeting. The DSM-5 represents the first major revision since 1994 to what is informally called the "Bible" of mental disorders. ... The revision process was also publicly contentious. Not only were there well-publicized professional disagreements, but there was also public outrage over various proposed changes to the DSM (Anspach 2011; Whooley and Horwitz 2013).

The conflict surrounding the revisions to autism was among the most contentious. One controversial change in the DSM-5 involves the collapse of several separate autism disorders listed in the DSM-IV into the single diagnostic category of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). At issue here is

the elimination of the widely applied diagnostic labels of Asperger's disorder and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), by reclassifying them as part of ASD. The new diagnostic criteria are also restructured in a manner that significantly reduces the number of ways to be diagnosed with autism. Specifically, there were 2,027 different symptom combinations in the DSM-IV, but only 11 ways to be diagnosed in the DSM-5 (Ferris 2012). Well before the criteria were formalized with the publication of the DSM-5, members of the autism advocacy community voiced their concerns that these changes would exclude many individuals who were already diagnosed and deny them access to needed treatment and services. The disquiet created around the autism revisions reveals just how much is at stake when it comes to how mental illnesses are defined in the DSM. It also reveals a larger story about the character and consequences of diagnoses as they relate to contemporary medicalization trends in U.S. society.

... Medicalization is the process whereby human experiences come to be defined or treated as medical in character (Conrad 2005). The creation or discovery of a new diagnosis is one key way in which medicalization occurs (Jutel 2009; Zola 1972). But medicalization also occurs through domain expansion, wherein an existing diagnostic definition widens to include cases far beyond its original scope. The latter process has been especially commonplace with respect to mental illnesses (Conrad and Potter 2000; Horwitz 2002). In contrast, there are relatively few instances of contraction, where a diagnostic definition narrows in ways that effectively exclude some previously diagnosed cases. There are a handful of transient mental illnesses that appeared in particular places and times only to disappear entirely (e.g., fugue); and, a few diagnoses have been removed from the DSM altogether (e.g., homosexuality) (Bayer 1987; Hacking 1998). Nevertheless, demedicalization via diagnostic contraction appears to be infrequent and, as such, has been rarely studied by scholars.



Herein lies the importance of the autism controversy preceding the publication of the *DSM-5*. The public dispute affords an occasion to examine how concerned constituencies respond to a perceived instance of domain contraction. A naturally occurring opportunity for just such a study arose when an article appeared in *The New York Times* with the title, "New Definition of Autism Will Exclude Many, Study Suggests" (Carey 2012). The article, which was published more than a year before the publication of the *DSM-5*, drew considerable public attention. Among other things, it generated several hundred online reader comments. These comments are illustrative of the types of claims and counterclaims (Best 1987) laypeople make vis-à-vis the prospect of demedicalization.

In our analysis we highlight two sides in the often-heated debate within *The New York Times* online reader forum: an amorphous group of social stakeholders who discussed the costs of medicalization to society more broadly, and individuals whose lives have been personally affected by autism who argued for the importance of the existing diagnosis. We also identify the stance of *diagnostic domain defense*, which is an oppositional claim on the part of laypeople with a personal connection to a diagnosis, to a real or perceived challenge to the definitional boundaries of that diagnosis. Professionals and other market entities with a vested interest in promoting a diagnosis also engage in defending diagnostic boundaries (Conrad 2005; Lane 2007). However, our conceptual focus is on the opposition that emerges from laypeople's "experience-based expertise" (Collins and Evans 2002). . . .

### Background and Conceptual Framework

#### The Autism Epidemic and the DSM

Individuals diagnosed with autism-related disorders exhibit mild to severe levels of impairment associated with their ability to interact and communicate with others (National Institute of Mental

Health 2012). The disorder is sometimes first detected by parents or educators, but it is formally diagnosed by medical professionals (e.g., pediatricians, neurologists, psychiatrists, or psychologists) (CDC 2014). Although there is no known cause or definitive biomarker for autism spectrum disorder, the current biomedical understanding is that it is "a complex neurological and developmental disorder" that "affects the structure and function of the brain and nervous system" (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2014), which may have an underlying genetic basis (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke 2014). There is currently no cure for autism, but it is treated using pharmaceutical, educational, and behavioral therapies (CDC 2014). In sum, autism is defined by, studied by, and falls within the jurisdiction of medical researchers, clinicians, and therapists. That having been said, current autism expertise has been "co-produced" by a host of medical and nonmedical experts in tandem with parent experts (Eyal 2013; Silverman 2012). . . .

#### Medicalization Trends and What Diagnoses Do

Medicalization involves defining or treating human experiences as medical in character that were not previously defined or treated as such. Instances of medicalization are widespread. We have witnessed the reframing of a host of deviant behaviors (e.g., drug use and sex offending), natural life experiences (e.g., pregnancy and aging), everyday problems of living (e.g., sadness and daytime sleepiness), and forms of social malaise (e.g., child mistreatment and domestic violence) as medical problems (Davis 2009). The persistent march toward medicalization, or overmedicalization, has itself been identified as a social problem (Clarke et al. 2003; Illich 1976; Zola 1972). That being said, medicalization is bidirectional (Conrad 2013): there are instances of demedicalization, wherein a problem once recognized as medical is no longer construed as such. Masturbation and homosexuality are the most frequently cited examples. . . .



... Annemarie Jutel (2009) describes the multiple types of work diagnoses do: Diagnosis is integral to the system of medicine and the way it creates social order. It organizes illness: identifying treatment options, predicting outcomes, and providing an explanatory framework. Diagnosis also serves an administrative purpose as it enables access to services and status, from insurance reimbursement to restricted-access medication, sick leave, and support group membership and so on (p. 278). ...

There are also a few contemporary examples of groups who resist being diagnosed with a mental illness. Pro-Ana groups and some individuals who engage in self-injury, for instance, contend that anorexia and cutting respectively are personal choices and core features of their identities, not medical disorders (Adler and Adler 2007; Boero 2012). In an effort to avoid the stigma of mental illness, a faction of transgender activists wants any reference to transgender disorders to be removed from the *DSM* (Burke 2011). There are also people aligned with the neurodiversity movement who consider a host of mental illness categories, including autism, to be natural and potentially beneficial human variations. This includes those who derive value from the "Aspie" identity but do not seek medical treatment or other resources afforded by the diagnosis (Armstrong 2010; Singh 2011). Some individuals within these above noted groups see themselves fighting the same battle fought by gay activists 40 years earlier. They eschew diagnostic labels and call for demedicalization.

Crusades for demedicalization on the part of affected laypeople are the exceptions rather than the rule. They are "islands of resistance reacting to a tidal wave of medicalization" (Conrad 2013: 209). ...

### Data and Methods

This study utilizes a novel source of data—a reader comment forum to an online newspaper. ... Reader comment forums are an important part of the new world of participatory journalism. In online forums, readers from across the country register

their opinions on the current events of the day. ... [R]eader comments represent an "index of operative social values" (Santana 2012: 1). ...

We analyzed these comments using qualitative content analysis, which allows researchers to make valid inferences based on the systematic study of qualitative data (Schreier 2012; Weber 1990). The advantage of studying texts like these reader comments is that they are naturally occurring data. ...

Reader comments to Carey's article were accepted on the *Times* website for three days, during which time 393 readers posted 642 comments. The overwhelming majority of individuals posted one comment ( $n=317$ ). However, 76 individuals posted more than one comment, one of whom posted 35 comments. Approximately 47 percent of the comments came from readers who live in eastern states ( $n=184$ ). Readers living in the West ( $n=93$ ), South ( $n=43$ ), and Midwest ( $n=32$ ), as well as international readers ( $n=20$ ), also commented. We were unable to determine residency for 21 individuals. Somewhat surprisingly, the majority of those who posted a comment could not be identified as key stakeholders in the debate. Sixty-eight percent ( $n=269$ ) of the readers who commented did not specify any personal or professional relationship to autism. It is also the case that these individuals posted the most comments (66 percent). Conversely, 20 percent ( $n=80$ ) of those who commented had a family member diagnosed with autism, 4 percent ( $n=14$ ) identified as having an autism-related disorder or meeting the diagnostic criteria, and 8 percent ( $n=30$ ) claimed to have professional expertise related to autism (e.g., doctor, therapist, special needs teacher).

### Analysis

#### The Dimensions of Diagnostic Domain Defense

The central focus of Carey's *New York Times* article was that the *DSM-5* criteria for autism were slated to become significantly more stringent. The resulting tenor of the comments was passionate



and the dialogue often confrontational. Family members, individuals with an autism-related diagnosis, and those with professional expertise in the area of autism overwhelmingly favored the existing diagnostic criteria. In contrast, roughly half of the readers who lacked a personal or professional connection to autism supported narrower criteria, while others in this camp were either silent or ambivalent on this particular matter. There is a caveat with respect to this divide: six people with a family member with severe autism and five people who met the *DSM-IV* diagnostic criteria also favored narrowing the diagnosis.

What the data most clearly illuminate is a debate between those who supported a more restricted definition of autism and others who defended the existing diagnosis. Ultimately, the reader comments reflect a debate about medicalization. The debate unfolded as follows: Someone in the former group would posit, "It's about time the diagnostic criteria change because..." and then go on to detail their concerns about the potential social costs of broadly defining autism. At that point, someone in the latter camp responded with the moral authority of their own experience to explain just how important it is to keep the *DSM-IV* diagnostic criteria in place. We identify these exchanges as points of contention. We present the most common points of contention and foreground how those on the side of the diagnostic status quo engaged in diagnostic domain defense.

#### Point of Contention: What is Normal and What Counts as Disease?

One point of contention emerged around the inherent problem of drawing a line between normal and abnormal. A number of readers proposed a narrower definition of autism as a way to limit the trend toward diagnosing slightly odd or quirky children. As pointed out by some readers, the category of "normal" has become increasingly narrow. "It is about time. Every slightly strange kid is labeled on the spectrum and considered 'defective' and in need of some type of 'treatment.' Those strange

kids often grow up to do great things. Leave them alone already!"<sup>74</sup> One reader complained, "Everyone who acts outside 'normal' gets to claim a disease. Oh, may we one day look back on this as the dark days of conformity." Others warned of the potential harm caused by creating pathology out of minor personality or behavioral differences:

- Why do you need to make up diagnoses for diseases that don't even exist? No one is denying that so-called "Aspies" have problems. But slapping a label on them doesn't help... This is a sociocultural zeitgeist in American life now—to pathologize differences. As if there's some kind of shining "normal" grade that you either do or don't make, and anything below that grade, is a disease.

Also related to the inherent problems associated with delineating normality from abnormality, a number of readers raised concerns about the highly arbitrary diagnostic categories in the *DSM*. The following comments are cases in point:

- The *DSM* is notoriously broad. Did you ever look at the definition of addiction? Under that definition, I am addicted to yellow cake with chocolate icing. In any event, some studies say 1 in 11 children have some form of autism. That seems very high based on my experience. It is good to tighten up the definition.
- This would be an interesting move, considering that the *DSM* has a reputation for pathologizing everything—i.e. turning vague or normal-range symptoms into diagnosable disorders or diseases.

These readers shared a general concern about the consequences for society at large when we narrow the limits of what is considered "normal" by expanding the definition of abnormality via medical diagnoses.

These claims elicited heated responses from family members asserting that autism is a *real* medical disorder with debilitating symptoms. Their child is not just a quirky kid who, if left alone,



could get by on his or her own. As expressed by one parent, "Changing the criteria for inclusion on the autism spectrum will not make these issues go away." Another parent elaborated on this point and, in so doing, captured the sentiments of others:

- To actually say that the overwhelming majority of persons diagnosed with some form of autism in the last two decades will no longer be considered autistic is Orwellian. . . . Goodness if we parents of autistic children knew that was the way to do it, we would have asked for this definition change decades ago. . . . Unbelievable . . . the psychiatric community changes the definition and our children have no more problems . . . who knew.

To family members, the line between normal and disorders on the autism spectrum is crystal clear. "It is true no one is normal, but trust me, there is such a thing as abnormal. If you had an autistic or developmentally disabled kid you'd know it." Using their own relationship to autism as the basis of privileged knowledge, these lay experts deflected a critique of the medicalization of difference advanced by some concerned readers.

But for parents there is more at stake than philosophical debates about the arbitrary and excessively broad character of *DSM* categories. What matters to them is that the diagnosis confirms their reality: their child is not normal. The disorder is not "phony" and, sadly, their child is proof. Parents, family members, and those diagnosed with an autism-related disorder shared personal stories of how the diagnosis represented a form of validation. A grandmother described the "relief" she felt when her granddaughter was diagnosed because she "knew something was different with her." Another reader explained that his mother, who "is on the high-functioning end of the spectrum" was "relieved to be diagnosed as an adult and to find out why she always felt 'different' from everyone else." Although there were only a small number of reader comments from those with an autism spectrum diagnosis, a 23-year old woman expressed her alarm

about the removal of Asperger's from the *DSM*: "I cant believe they would do something like this. . . . I was diagnosed with Aspergers when i was 11 years old. . . . I couldnt imagine how things would be if i wasnt diagnosed with Aspergers."

The diagnosis renders a complex and troubling set of experiences meaningful. Parents shared their accounts of how a vast array of their children's problems, including troubles at school, awkward social skills and encounters, frequent tantrums, sensitivities to noise, incessant teeth grinding, head banging, and obsessions with things ranging from the Titanic to Greek mythology, were made coherent by a diagnosis. One father provided a powerful description of how the diagnosis fit his direct observations:

- We initially resisted the diagnosis when the mental health pros at school proposed it—but after 5 police visits to the house because of violent behavior, 2 psychiatric hospitalizations, and more learning on our part, we accepted it because it made sense of what we were observing and experiencing and offered a path forward for a very troubled child.

In turn, a coherent story validates the diagnosis. Jutel (2009) describes the simultaneous "interpretive and organizational" character of diagnoses as follows: "It [a diagnosis] provides structure to a narrative of dysfunction, or a picture of disarray, and imposes official order, sorting out the real from the imagined, the valid from the feigned, the significant from the insignificant" (p. 279). Family members shared personal stories of their child's hardships to substantiate the reality of autism, deflect accusations that they are medicalizing quirkiness, and defend a broader set of diagnostic criteria. From their privileged vantage point as lay experts, narrowing the diagnostic criteria would be irrational insofar as the *DSM-IV* criteria are merely the natural expression of the disorder itself. These parents and family members supported the medical framing of autism and resisted any movement toward its demedicalization.



**Point of Contention: Parental Blame Versus Parental Absolution**

Many of the comments addressed the causes of autism and the reasons for the sharp increase in the number of children with these disorders. Several readers accused parents of “causing” autism through permissive parenting. “Thank god. Too many of these so-called ‘autistic’ children are what we would have called brats.” Another reader explained that some parents seek out an autism diagnosis when they “cannot accept they have a discipline problem.” Mocking the notion that autism is the result of a neurochemical abnormality, one man explained, “I was a kid with similar problems in the early ‘60s: the remedy was I got sent to a military school, my brain chemistry got sorted out really fast.” He continued, “[m]ore discipline and structure in children’s lives are what’s needed, not the enabling and reinforcement of social pathology through contrived biological diagnoses.” Like these readers, many others suggested that the real problem is parents who indulge and coddle their children. This constituency argued that there are significant social costs when parents abdicate personal responsibility for their child’s behavior by seeking a medical solution.

Parents and family members of children responded to these accusations with intense anger. Parents joined together to vehemently deflect attacks on their parenting. Comments such as “we parents” or “speaking for us parents. . .” created an *us* versus *them* dynamic. Parents defended their children and themselves, and some grew downright hostile, calling their critics “ignorant,” “stupid,” “mean,” and “clueless.” Family members asserted that they, better than anyone else, know what autism is really like. After all, they live with it every day of their lives. Readers who suggested that their children’s problems are a matter of discipline were simply deemed to be misinformed, if not mean spirited. One parent suggested that critics should, “Walk a mile in my shoes. Or five feet in those of my son. It is easy to look through windows

of someone’s home—understanding what you see is more difficult.” Another derided the “brilliance” of people she encounters in the grocery store when her son is “mid-meltdown” who say “‘he needs a nap,’ or worse, ‘he needs a spanking!’ . . . Wow! Naps and spanking cure AUTISM!!!! Alert the press!!!!”

Although not unique to autism, the disorder is characterized by a disjuncture between troubling symptoms and a normal outward appearance. Just as there is no biomedical test for autism, there are often no visual indicators to differentiate an autistic child from a “normal” child. This is especially pronounced in the case of high-functioning autism (Gray 2002). Consequently, when children appear normal but behave abnormally, both children and parents experience social stigma (Farrugia 2009; Gray 2002). A child’s autistic behaviors, such as tantrums in the supermarket, are often interpreted as a reflection of parental incompetence. One father described how he believes people view his son, who was reprimanded for making “nervous noises” at school: “Some of you think. . . he is just a brat with bad discipline. You see a normal looking kid from a distance. He doesn’t look like a ‘spaz’ or a ‘retard.’” A diagnosis comes with exemptions (Parsons 1951): parents are absolved from blame and there is a reason for their child’s unusual behavior. In the face of such harsh indictment of their parenting, coupled with the urge to defend their children from unkind labels, it is no surprise that parents cling to the vindication provided by an autism diagnosis.

**Point of Contention: Unfair Benefits versus Diagnostic Entitlements**

Similar to accusations of bad parenting, some readers claimed that the autism epidemic is in part the result of parents’ attempts to garner unfair benefits for their children. As one reader grumbled, “There is a very strong incentive to be diagnosed with ‘autism,’ Asperger’s, or any number of other psychological illnesses—a diagnosis can mean access to disability benefits (free money) and advantages



in our educational system." Some readers even accused parents of "shopping" for an autism diagnosis to access these benefits, going from doctor to doctor until they find one who is willing to diagnose their child.

Others emphasized the idea that many parents no longer accept anything less than an exceptional child. Instead, they are quick to diagnose mediocrity in an attempt to get special services to enhance their child's academic performance. One reader complained, "I personally know someone who insisted her child was autistic so she could get him into a special school. The only thing wrong with him was that he was stupid and spoiled." An educator from the Silicon Valley commented on the high number of children in his part of the country with special accommodations and suggested that "rich parents" have manipulated the system to compensate for their children's inability to compete. The following comments express similar concerns:

- [P]arents have to accept the fact that their son or daughter may not be the perfect little being they expect; it's not a medical condition if you happen to be the least sharpest tack in the box or dim bulb; we shouldn't be medicalizing everything.
- I also think that parents have an almost insatiable desire to see their children as exceptional, and this take the chuckles out of the Lake Wobegone effect. No one has an average, good kid anymore.

Yet another reader charged parents with autistic children of being "helicopter parents" who "want society to coddle their 'special snowflake' from birth to death with subsidized housing, specialized schooling, and of course, a support check monthly along with food stamps." These types of claims are interesting in light of the fact that autism prevalence rates are positively associated with family socioeconomic status, and states and regions with higher rates of wealth have higher rates of autism disorders (Eyal et al. 2010; King and Bearman 2011). In various ways, these comments capture a

concern that some individuals make strategic use of a diagnosis to accrue advantage in a competitive society.

Parents and other family members defended themselves and their children in the face of these comments. The following parental retort captures a common response: "No one wants their child to be 'exceptional' by being labeled with a developmental disorder. Come on now." Another parent declared, "I would like my daughter to be TYPICAL like my other two." Rather than wanting an "exceptional" child, parents explained that their child needs services in order to merely function in the world. Some expressed their hopes that interventions now would help their child achieve independence in the future.

- [W]e as parents took out loans in order to help our daughter with therapies. Yes some of those therapies have helped. Is she cured? No she is not. Will she be able to live on her own, hold down a job, lead a fulfilling life? We do not know these answers . . . Please no flames for me here, I am a tired parent, who just needed to vent, and trying the best to help my child survive.

While it is true that a diagnosis is generally the key that opens the door to many resources and services, family members and individuals with an autism diagnosis were quick to challenge accusations that the diagnosis is merely a device to garner benefits.

- [C]ome live with our Asperger's/PDD-NOS child for a while and then tell me that my wife and I are helicopter parents who have made up this diagnosis to get government benefits. . . . Without medication and the intensive help given in a therapeutic school, this mid-teen might well be in jail by now if past behavior patterns had persisted. Our child is not retarded (IQ tests in the normal-high range), but does have a medical condition that needs pharmacological, therapeutic and



educational interventions to make independent functioning, perhaps, possible in adult life. The help given now—some of it government funded—makes larger societal, not to mention personal, costs, less likely. I'm trying very hard to be polite so this comment will be posted, so I'll just say you have no idea what you're talking about. I'm thinking the same thing in much ruder words as I write.

Parents expressed intense fear that under narrower diagnostic criteria, many children would be denied the very services that are necessary for hope of a better future. The following comments are exemplary:

- As the parent of a 13-year-old boy who has Asperger's, I'm eternally grateful to the dedicated professionals who have aided him as the result of the diagnosis. To deny the diagnosis and so the aid is to condemn him and those like him the help they need to become successful adults.
- I can't explain the feeling of initial despair followed by radiant hope that seeing your child learn to speak and interact with the world means. [My son] only got his therapy because he was diagnosed.

Other parents told similar stories of successful therapeutic interventions and warned readers about the catastrophic outcome of denying the very diagnosis that granted access to those interventions. These comments expose a belief, promoted by various entities in what has been called the "autism matrix," that there is a "critical window of opportunity" wherein an atypical child can receive timely treatment with potentially transformative results (Eyal et al. 2010). The autism epidemic has, in no small measure, been fueled by this therapeutic optimism and its concomitant rhetoric of hope. Parents and family members desperately tried to convey how more restrictive criteria would deny many children, including their own, a path forward. In light of this sentiment, they are unlikely

to abandon the hopeful prospects that a diagnosis affords their child.

#### Point of Contention: Finite Resources versus Necessity of Treatment

As foreshadowed in previous reader comments, another point of contention involved the financial limitations of providing services for every person diagnosed on the autism spectrum, especially given the country's current fiscal crisis. Although some people were sympathetic to the needs of those diagnosed, they nevertheless pointed out that we live in a world of finite resources. The following comments describe the difficult but necessary task of drawing a line in the financial sand:

- As a society we can provide some compensation to help the most affected, but we can't afford, for example, rent assistance to everyone who has a hard time renting because they don't know when to make eye contact. We do not have infinite resources.
- Personally, I want to make certain the limited funds and services that society has set aside for autistic patients are going to patients who actually have the illness, not just the diagnosis.

The last comment decouples the illness from the diagnosis. As such, it is in line with a concern expressed by other readers that resources for genuinely disabled children are being diverted to those with "trivial" problems. They maintained that a narrower definition would create a more rational allocation of costly assistance:

- It is about time that some discipline was applied to the liberal naming of all sorts of young people as autistic, having ADD, or other categories of mental issue. This has . . . diverted attention away from the most serious cases in a blizzard of dubious cases.

Although family members overwhelmingly supported the diagnostic status quo, a small number shared concerns similar to those expressed above. As one parent explained, "I have a 16-year-old also with



classic autism and have been shocked at some of the kids who have the label and are getting services as I can barely detect anything out of the ordinary." Another family member favored more stringent criteria in order to avoid putting children with significant disabilities "in fierce competition for resources with kids who are 'autistic-ish'"

For many readers who held this opinion, a narrower set of diagnostic criteria would be a welcome response to run-away government spending. This is seen, for example, in the comment posted by "Concerned Citizen" from Anywheresville, USA: "It's time for a more specific set of diagnostic tools, and time to get a lot of greedy people off the government dime. We can't afford this any longer." Additional comments revealed similar opinions: "This is long overdue. Our country has become a place where everybody gets a diagnosis, a pill, a disability check and an excuse!"; and, from another reader: "I for one don't want to follow the path of the Greeks and forever just assume 'somebody else' will pay." Yet another reader warned that providing free care to everyone who wants it will "continue the bloodletting of our ailing economy and dwindling power."

These claims drew an impassioned response from the majority of family members. They argued that all children on the spectrum deserve support. Some worried that efforts to narrow the definition of autism point to a larger, troubling agenda: "I fear this re-defining of the diagnosis is part of the coming wave of cost cutting and dumping of the values of caring for others. Where is the Village that it takes to raise a child?" Parents were especially offended at the suggestion that there is an abundance of free services for children on the autism spectrum.

- The people who think there is some kind of gravy train for the handicapped don't realise just how mingy those services really are, and how many hoops you must jump through to avail yourself even of what little there is, and how great the humiliation and stigma can be

(particularly in the ignorant, arrogant view of many of the posters here who have not got a clue).

Drawing on the notion of "a window of opportunity," other parents made the case that helping children now is a cost-saving strategy in the long term and warned against economic short-sightedness. As in this comment, they reminded skeptical readers about the intersection between compassion, therapeutic outcome, and cost savings.

- We must be particularly careful, in an era of strained public resources, not to make a penny-wise and pound-foolish decision on that score. Doing what we can to see to it that children with disabilities receive the aid they need to lead as productive, independent lives as possible is not only the humane thing to do, it's the most cost effective.

In response to the heated anti-government rhetoric, some family members stressed that the problem was the government's priorities rather than the role of the government per se. The following comment is illustrative:

- Yeah, as long as it's not your kid, we're wasting money... The trillion bucks we spent in Iraq is what "blood-let" our economy and power, not helping children and their families to live with a set of problems that are in no way their fault.

These exchanges reflect the basic philosophical scaffolding that guides political debates in the United States—the role of the state in the lives of individuals and the essential character of a good society (Lakoff 2002). Indeed, diagnoses are necessarily influenced by large-scale social, economic, and political processes (Anspach 2011; Jutel and Nettleton 2011). While the neoliberal agenda is not new, during the last several decades the politics and ideology of fiscal responsibility (i.e., austerity) have become more culturally salient. In theory, this should create a climate that is more favorably



disposed toward demedicalization via diagnostic contraction. This is especially true with respect to autism given that current interventions include a costly and comprehensive array of medical, behavioral, and developmental health services, as well as a host of other benefits that often extend into adulthood (AMCHP 2012). A point of contention in the autism debate is that in a welfare state, however atrophied, the work diagnoses do for some citizens is made possible by other citizens. As such, diagnoses create interest groups along a diagnostic divide: beneficiaries and benefactors. The diffuse opposition of benefactors signifies the possible existence of a "countervailing force" (Light 2010) that is concerned about the larger social costs of unrestricted medicalization. But, as we have demonstrated, the beneficiaries have significantly more to lose and gain when it comes to diagnostic change.

### Discussion

... [O]ur analysis of the online reader comments demonstrates that a diagnosis can be "a kind of focal point where numerous interests, anxieties, values, knowledge, practices, and other factors merge and converge" (Jutel and Nettleton 2011: 798). Readers skeptical about the "autism epidemic" pointed to a number of social factors contributing to the sharp increase in the disorder, including permissive parenting, the inclination on the part of many parents (and society) to diagnose quirky children or children whose social and academic skills fall below parental (and societal) expectations, and the desire on the part of some parents to use the diagnosis to give their children a competitive edge. Although they do not have a direct, personal stake in how autism is defined, they framed the issue in terms of the larger social costs associated with diagnostic expansion. The social stakeholders raised broad concerns: how society should define "normal," who should be responsible for the behavior of children, whether it is acceptable for individuals to use a diagnosis to gain an unfair advantage in a competitive society, and the appropriate allocation of finite, taxpayer-supported government resources. In sum,

by speaking to the troubling social consequences of medicalization (Conrad 2013) they advanced a compelling argument in favor of a shift toward demedicalization via diagnostic domain contraction. Social stakeholders challenged the medical definition of the problem, its scope, and its solutions, as championed by the majority of autism advocates.

Readers with the most at stake in the diagnostic upheaval vehemently countered these challenges. Their debate with social stakeholders exposes the dimensions of diagnostic domain defense. Diagnostic domain defense is an oppositional claim on the part of laypeople with a personal connection to a diagnosis to a real or perceived challenge to the definitional boundaries of that diagnosis. This opposition is grounded in first-hand experience with autism and a concurrent certainty that autistic disorders are not "made-up" artifacts of less stringent diagnostic criteria. The everyday lives of these lay experts confirm the existence of the disease. This group of individuals challenged their critics, whom they deemed clueless and hurtful, to staunchly defend the diagnostic status quo. Diagnostic domain defense is fortified by the anguish of the illness experience. In the case of autism, the anguish that emanates from parental love is particularly noteworthy (Silverman 2012). Parents experience personal distress and mourn for their child who may not live the life of their hopes and dreams. This emotional gestalt and a rational quest for some palliative are elemental to diagnostic domain defense. Diagnostic benefits further motivate a defensive stance. For parents, the diagnosis validates their parenting, provides a coherent framework to account for their child's problems, serves as a tool to convey to others that their child has a disabling illness, and grants them access to services that provide support and hope. Those with an autism diagnosis also access these services, albeit from a different position. For all these reasons there is little cause for diagnostic beneficiaries to lay down their diagnoses and disband. Said differently, diagnostic domain defense represents a formidable barrier to demedicalization. ...



Given this tendency, it is essential to step back and critically assess why more of us wander into diagnoses in the first place. Diagnoses have come to be seen as one of the few venues for any response to complex forms of human and social suffering. Medical solutions to entrenched social problems are politically viable in that they target individuals rather than make demands for economic or social change. In the weak U.S. welfare state, we are more likely to treat the medical needs of patients than to fulfill the rights of citizens. In such a context, diagnoses are routinely (over)summoned. No doubt the current economic crisis has accelerated this trend. This context creates forces that both favor and resist medicalization. On the one hand, patients and caregivers favor domain expansion because a medical diagnosis is one of the few means by which citizens can make legitimate demands on the state. On the other hand, the expansion of the state via mass diagnosing triggers retrenchment policies that seek to minimize governmental responsibility for "personal" problems. This dynamic is precarious and ongoing. We encourage sociologists who study the union of medicalization and diagnoses to undertake further research on this dynamic and its consequences, not only with respect to autism but in other diagnostic domains.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What do sociologists mean by "medicalization"? How is medicalization related to social boundaries? What experiences have been medicalized in the past? Why, in general, is medicalization spreading? What are some examples of demedicalization? What causes demedicalization?
2. If medical conditions are rooted in biology, how can new ones appear and other ones disappear? What's the nature of the relationship between the body and the social in medicalization? If we say that medical diagnoses are socially constructed, does that mean the medical conditions are not real?
3. What is ASD and how did the introduction of the DSM-V change the medical community's definition of autism? Who was left out of the new definition? What resources depend on a diagnosis of autism? How does a diagnostic label influence people's thoughts about and interactions with each other? How does having a diagnosis shape people's thoughts about themselves? Their ability to access medical and educational resources?
4. What are the three points of contention? What are the central positions of each side?
5. The first point of contention reflects a broader debate over the moral judgments we attach to normality and abnormality. Does being different necessarily imply inferiority? What about when the difference is medicalized? In other words, can we have social boundaries without hierarchy? What are some current or historical examples that illustrate your position?
6. The expansion of medical diagnoses is, in part, a response to the weak social welfare state in the United States. How so? How do medical categories spread to other people? How is the medical system the result of shared meanings and joint action?
7. This piece and the introduction provide you two examples of widely contested social meanings and the consequences for social structures: around same-sex marriage and the revision of ASD criteria. What are two other specific examples of the contestation of boundaries? How did people contest them, and what was at stake for various groups? What tipped the balance in favor of one definition over another?



## Disciplined Preferences: Explaining the (Re)Production of Latino Endogamy

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As we saw in Martin's piece "Becoming a Gendered Body" (Selection 11), creating social boundaries takes considerable work. Maintaining those boundaries, as with any type of social organization, also takes work. We reinforce or change boundaries through our interactions with others. When boys wear hairstyles typically worn by girls or try to join the dance squad, they force peers, extended family members, teachers, coaches, and others to confront their narrow gendered expectations—in interaction. So too the child who refuses to abide by the sex categorization given at birth or adopts gender neutral pronouns such as ze, zir, zirs. When ze refuses to check a particular gender box at school registration or corrects a server at a restaurant who misidentifies zir, the school administrator or server may adapt his or her categorization scheme, continue to misidentify ze's gender, or innovate another interactional response. How others respond, of course, reinforces the two-category gender system—or challenges it.

As we saw in Desmond's piece on firefighters (Selection 27), furthermore, accountability is an important dimension of social interaction. It is also central to social boundaries and other forms of social organization. Recall that accountability is when people orient, assess, and enforce particular ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in interaction (Hollander 2013). In *Rigging the Game*, Michael Schwalbe (2008) shows

us further how interactional accountability is tied to social organization: networks of actors may be called upon to hold people accountable. A dissatisfied student may find a class to have been a waste of time and demand a refund. But interactions with a variety of social actors make a refund unlikely: the professor who thought the class was valuable and laughs off the request, for instance. And the registrar who refuses to let the student enroll in new classes unless the bills are paid in full. And the business office worker who rejects the student's request to get a refund lest he or she be fired by his or her supervisor, and the campus security officer who removes the student from campus for being "belligerent" or "trespassing on private property." Consistent, repeated interactions with all these actors serve as a "net of accountability" (Schwalbe 2008), which affirms the role of tuition at the university or college.

Vasquez-Tokos examines the net of accountability Latinos face when picking a life partner. In particular, she demonstrates why so many Latinos continue to marry endogamously, or within racial or ethnic boundaries. Despite the residence of immigrants in the United States for decades and the legal freedom to intermarry, Latinos in the United States still develop romantic tastes—"disciplined preferences"—to marry within their ethnic group. Family members and peers are particularly influential in shaping romantic preferences: they not only surveil Latinos' romantic interests

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but advise them who to date and threaten them if they date non-Latinos. Their dating standards, moreover, rely on tired racial stereotypes—about Latinos being troublemakers and family-oriented and of blacks as being unworthy. Over time, many Latinos internalized the racial preferences of people around them into their own dating preferences.

Vasquez-Tokos' analysis offers us several sociological psychology lessons. First, what appears at first as an individual experience—falling in love—is actually enmeshed in layers of social interactions. Second, much is at stake with social boundaries: being part of a group brings senses of coherence, belonging, importance, value, and direction. With this much at stake, actors work hard to reinforce or adjust the boundaries to tap into their benefits. Third, boundaries require constant interactional vigilance and border patrolling if they are to remain in place. This boundary protection happens within a net of accountability. Finally, over time, we often come to value and internalize boundaries, even if they rely on stereotypes.

#### References

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... Today, race continues to organize intimate relationships. Despite a decline in racial endogamy in the twentieth century, race persists as the most powerful division in the marriage market (Rosenfeld 2008). Endogamy (intragroup relations) is commonplace, reflected by 87 percent of people in the United States marrying within their own racial category (Bean and Stevens 2003; Lee and Bean 2010). In 2008, the intermarriage rates for native-born Americans were 7.1 percent for whites, 17.4 percent for blacks, 72.5 percent for Asians, and 52.5 percent for Latinos (Lee and Bean 2010: 87).

... Beyond their demographic importance, Latinos are a significant case because of their position

in the "racial middle" (O'Brien 2008), their marriage patterns portending whether they will eventually become "whites," "honorary whites," or part of a "collective black" category (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Haney López 1996; Lee and Bean 2010; Marrow 2011). Some argue that higher intermarriage rates between non-black racial minorities (Latinos and Asians) and whites than blacks and whites signals that the boundaries of whiteness are expanding to include formerly excluded groups (Lee and Bean 2010; Yancey 2003). However, while Latinos may see more cultural similarities between their group and whites than blacks (Lee and Bean 2010), I challenge the assumption that higher rates of Latino/white intermarriage than black/white intermarriage translates to Latinos moving up and out of the racial middle. . . .

#### Explaining Endogamy: Border Patrolling by Third Parties

... Symbolic boundary literature shows that individuals and groups use moral discourses to maintain group worth, to position one group above others, and to guard against the erosion of advantage (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Roth 2012; Sherman 2009). Endogamy is a boundary that maintains social closure, prohibits others' access to valuable resources, and is encoded in representations of social life that construct interracial relations as deviant (Childs 2009). If the objective of boundary work is to differentiate a group from others (Roth 2012), intraracial sexual relations are a powerful tool to enforce social closure and visibly perpetuate, through monoracial families, group cohesion. Endogamy is the ultimate symbolic boundary enforcer in that it "support[s] the social structure by helping to fix social distances . . . between groups" (Merton [1941] 2000:483). I propose that a cogent way to explain endogamy is to link the structural argument of segregation with community-level enactments of boundaries. The question then becomes: How do people enforce and internalize the social edict of intramarriage?



... "Border patrolling" is a form of discrimination that stems from "the belief that people should stick to their own, taking race and racial categories for granted" (Dalmage 2000: 42). Boundary surveillance perpetuates the myth of group homogeneity, punishes boundary crossers, and may be internalized to limit transgressions. . . .

Family- and community-enforced surveillance as well as self-discipline—the internalization of societal power—help explain the continued high level of racial endogamy in a social system where intermarriage is legal. Violence and intimidation have been historically effective deterrents to intermarriage as "groups actively police each other to ensure that domination is maintained" by means of "threats of violence or actual violence" (Childs 2009; Collins 2008: 267; Hodes 1997). Focusing on the interactional level of analysis is crucial because race is "*performative* . . . [racial and] ethnic boundaries. . . constituted by day-to-day affirmations, reinforcements, and enactments of. . . differences" (Nagel 2000: 111, emphasis in original). This article fleshes out the interactional mechanisms by which third parties, such as family, peers and community, engrave racial and sexual boundaries. . . .

### Methods

This article draws from 70 in-depth, life history interviews with heterosexual Latinos in endogamous and exogamous marriages and their adult children living independently. I include both partners in Latino intramarriages but only Latino partners of intermarriages for, while they married exogamously, their dating histories and counsel to their children concerning marriage is useful information. These data are drawn from a larger comparative project on dating and marriage histories among Latinos and their partners.

Of the 70 Latino interviewees, 29 are men whereas 41 are women. Sixty-five are married, four are divorced, and one is single/never married. Six adult children of married interviewees (one single/never married, three married, two divorced) were interviewed about their romantic lives, allowing me

access to intergenerational family narratives of race. All interviewees self-identify as Latino; 56 are U.S. born and 14 are foreign born.

The sample is predominantly comprised of people with Mexican ancestry. Of 70 interviewees, 49 are monoethnic Mexican American, 13 are multiethnic Mexican American (10 with white parentage and 3 with Native American parentage), and 8 have other Latin American ancestry. My field sites in the Southwest and Midwest yielded a largely Mexican American set of interviewees, which reflects the Mexican-origin population's majority share of the U.S. Latino population (63 percent in 2010) as well as their concentration in these regions (Lopez and Dockterman 2011). . . .

Interviewees range in socioeconomic status, as measured by education and individual income, though the bulk are middle class. Nineteen percent have a high school degree or less, about half of them have some college or a college degree, and 30 percent have a graduate degree. . . .

... Forty-seven interviewees are in the Latino/Latino intraracial marriage category (3 divorced), 16 Latinos are in the Latino/white intermarriage category (2 divorced), and 6 Latinos are in Latino/non-Latino racial minority intermarriage category. . . .

... I used a life history approach, inquiring about interviewees' racial background, identity claims, natal family, dating history, marital family, childrearing strategies if they were parents, and cultural practices. . . .

On a reflexive note, my social position as a Latina who is half Caucasian and half Mexican American likely facilitated access to the population studied. . . .

### The (Re)Production of Endogamy

#### Segregation and Socioeconomic Status

... Due to spatial isolation, neighborhood public schools concentrate racially homogenous communities, delimiting dating options (Alba and Nee 2003; Lichter et al. 2007; Massey and Denton 1993;



Rosenfeld 2009). Julia and Lisandro Quinonez, both Mexican American, agree that living in predominantly Latino East LA made endogamous romance seem inevitable. Julia remarked, "our high school was like 90 percent Latino. . . my [dating] options were pretty limited [laughing]. . . Everybody was Mexican." Lisandro concurred, "Because everybody was Chicano or Latino in high school, it wasn't really a question." Residential segregation is not exclusively a California issue, as 46-year-old Cynthia Herrera-Redgrave from Kansas made clear: "When I was [in] high school I . . . [thought] I was gonna marry somebody who was Mexican. . . That's what I mostly [saw] around me." Neighborhood segregation naturalizes endogamous partnerships, shaping fields of vision in both a practical and cognitive sense. As Cynthia stated, "You wouldn't even think about it."

Thirty-six-year-old Vincent Venegas, who arrived in the United States from Mexico at age seven, lived amongst poor Mexican Americans and African Americans in Los Angeles in his youth. Residential propinquity shaped Vincent's understanding of racial boundaries and attractiveness: "I had several crushes on African Americans and Latinas. . . I didn't perceive the other races to find my race or myself attractive. . . I dated Latina and African American. . . We were close [in social] class." His gang affiliation limited his social circle and disciplined his preferences to include similarly lower-class non-white groups: "Since I was a gang member . . . the possibilities are even smaller. You encircle yourself in a little bubble of. . . gang life: the gang members and the gang girls. I built myself a smaller bubble and it contained me."

One of the poorer interviewees in his youth, who stopped his education at high school, Vincent's segregated adolescence was his "little bubble" that naturalized dating within his socioeconomic stratum. In a social environment that "contained" him, segregation supplanted the need for active discipline and shaped his notions of attractiveness and his marital outcome (he married a local Mexican American "party girl"). Residential segregation

curtails dating options, this structural characteristic eradicating the need for meso-level discipline by making endogamous partnerships seem inevitable.

. . . College-educated individuals who dated interracially faced less discipline than their lower-educated counterparts. Not only did the college-educated experience expanded dating pools, they were usually removed from their family's sphere of influence, this independence tempering criticism (Rosenfeld 2009). In contrast, interviewees without college education led more segregated lives with fewer opportunities for cross-racial dating. If the less educated crossed the color line, they faced harsher forms of discipline than their higher-educated peers because if dating "up," their low class status multiplied their disadvantage and unsuitability and if dating "down," they faced tighter social control by spatially proximate kin and peers.

#### **Learned Incompatibility: Racialized Rebuffs, Failed Romance, and Familial Pressure**

Outside of segregated spaces, which structurally limit choice, repeated racializing and disciplining encounters teach Latinos to curtail their romantic options. These racist social forces meant to preserve white privilege accumulate to a *learned incompatibility* with whites, which Latinos nonetheless reinterpret as a "choice" to preserve their agency. Repeated rejection taught Latino men and women to discipline their preferences in socially acceptable ways, and interviewees used a language of defeat ("it'll never work out") to explain their dim prospects with whites.

Latinos' learned incompatibility with whites results from displeasing interracial dating experiences. Omar Zelaya, a 48-year-old U.S.-born son of immigrants, internalized repeated racial messages from women who declined to date him:

I got along with white women fine. I had no problem with them. But, I used to shy away from them a little bit more. . . We couldn't be as readily acceptable to each other. . . Some of these white girls. . . didn't really pay attention to you . . . [they



were] stuck up or arrogant. . . . Maybe my accent gave me away. . . . Some of them were. . . unfriendly [and] had the tendency to . . . brush you off.

Disregard from white women disciplined Omar to avoid situations that would likely incur rejection. Externally imposed discipline converted to internally imposed self-discipline when he withdrew from white potential dates to avoid shame. Mentioning his Spanish accent that may be misinterpreted to indicate foreign-born status (Jiménez 2010), Omar comprehended white women's insouciance as based on race or (incorrect) assumptions about his nativity. Since he "got along fine" with white women, he placed the onus on them for failed romance. When white women rejected him and status contamination in one move, Omar learned that they are not "readily acceptable to each other." After repeated interactions, Omar internalized the racial order, "shying away" from white women. He ultimately married a less educated Mexican national over whom *he* holds the power advantage.

Awareness of mainstream racism and sexism can inspire preference for intraracial romance (Nemoto 2009), and yet racialized rebuffs from whites function differently for men and women. Varying forms of gendered racialization play out in the dating realm: men are taught to view themselves as unattractive, menacing, and excluded, whereas women's dating encounters consign them to a sexualized, othered, and borderline-acceptable position (Vasquez 2010). Xochitl Velasco, a 39-year-old Mexican American from Kansas who is married to a Bolivian national, asserted that in-marriage avoids racialized and gendered stereotypes that she confronted in interracial romances with white men. Xochitl desired to escape a problematic set of stereotypes white men held about Latinas, this learned incompatibility resulting from failed interracial romances. She found Latino men to be more suitable for her because they offer refuge from disconcerting stereotypes:

I always . . . knew I wanted to be married to a Latino. I always was partial to Latinos, boyfriends

and everything. . . . [In] college [I] started dating a white guy . . . [and saw] differences between him and I. . . . Some white men that are married to my Latina girlfriends. . . . like the "Latina spice" . . . . They make fun of her accent. They think it's cute. . . . They like that exoticness. . . . I didn't ever like that. I don't want to be treated as an "other" in my relationship. I knew with Latinos there was never that "other" factor. . . . I was just Xochitl Borges and there was nothing particularly Latina about me—I [did not] have to put on this Latinaness or take it off. . . .

Experience with racialized and gendered stereotypes disciplined Xochitl to conclude that whites were a mismatch and to desire Latinos. She learned from personal experience and observation that white men's exoticization of her would be alienating, her conclusion of incompatibility an acquired perspective. With Latinos, she reasoned, she could avoid being "treated as an 'other'" in an intimate relationship.

Similar to Xochitl, Lydia Duarte, a Mexican American married to a Peruvian, excluded white men from her dating pool. Her preference for Latinos was based on her belief that white men seek a stereotype that she does not fit: "I've never . . . had a serious relationship with a white guy. . . . I don't fit the bill." Lydia nevertheless had encounters with white men that unveiled their imagery of Latinas: "Some [white] men have said, 'Oh yeah, we love Mexican girls. You . . . are hot and spicy. . . .' I'm probably just too strong. . . ." Given their perceptions of white men's imagery of Latinas, both Xochitl and Lydia determined white men to be incompatible mates and resisted their racialized understandings of Latina womanhood. They sought comprehension from Latinos who, while not free from their own perceptions of Latina femininity, are unlikely to hold the same brand of alienating stereotypes as white men.

Both white men's stereotypes and Latinas' reactions involve what social psychology refers to as a "category-based response," that is, "[reactions] to another person as an interchangeable member of a



social group," most often occurring among groups in which one is not a member (Fiske 2004: 398). In other words, a reaction to a specific individual is generalized to an entire group. In order to escape category-based responses from white men, some Latinas insulate themselves within their own in-group, marrying Latinos. Just as white men prejudge them on the basis of their gender and race, so too do they prejudge white men. These Latina women employ group-based logic not only to create precautionary distance from white men but also to envision closeness with Latino men whom they presume possess compatible qualities based on racial similarity.

Disciplined preference does not rob individuals of agency. Instead, disciplined preference (whites as incompatible and Latinos as preferable) is self-protective, stemming from the need to preserve racial dignity and avoid misapprehension. Rob Esposito, married to a Mexican American/Native American woman, stated:

I knew I wasn't going to marry a white girl. I knew I was going to marry a Mexican or Indian girl. . . . You . . . dated white girls for one reason and then you had the [Mexican American and Native American] girls you were going to marry (Laugh).

Holding different standards for dating and marriage is notable; some interviewees were adventurous in dating yet restrictive relative to marital prospects (Blackwell and Lichter 2004). Oscar Cota, a 44-year-old Kansan, used similar imagery to explain his dating patterns:

My [Mexican American] wife says, "you always wanted to go with the white girls because you knew they were easier." I . . . knew that I would marry a Mexican woman. Because when you think of family, being able to raise families, being good wives . . . and maybe [that is] stereotypical—good wives, good cooks—[but] . . . I always knew I would marry a Mexican woman.

"Heteronormative sexual stereotypes" such as these tap into ethnic cultures' "gender regimes"

and are used to evaluate moral value (Nagel 2000: 113). Stereotypes about white women as "easy" and Mexican women as "wifely" shape Latino men's marital preferences: these men pursue interracial sexual liaisons before engaging in a "winnowing" process (Blackwell and Lichter 2004) and selecting proper, endogamous marriage partners.

This dichotomous thinking about Mexican and white women is a sexualized way for Latino men to recuperate agency. Use of value-laden ascriptions of "family oriented" and "marriageable" valorize Latina women, denigrate white women who are off-limits, and rationalize the "choice" of endogamy. While dating and marriage are not entirely agent-centered processes, claiming the "choice" of endogamy rhetorically resists the confines of a socially constricted marriage market. Repeated encounters with whites coach Latinos to believe that they are only suitable for other Latinos, reproducing endogamy and maintaining the racial hierarchy.

#### Preserving White Privilege: Anti-Latino Surveillance and Violence

. . . Latino men are punished more harshly than Latina women when dating whites. White parents' prejudicial (sometimes violent) messages about their children's Latino romantic interests encourage endogamy, this disciplining during adolescence having repercussions in adulthood. For example, in high school, Nathan Lucero, a Mexican American from Lawrence, Kansas who is now 51 years old, faced threats of bodily harm from his white girlfriend's father:

[She] was a brunette with green eyes. . . . Her dad hated me. He didn't give me a chance 'cuz I was Mexican. . . . I only met [her dad] once. . . . She came out [when I arrived to pick her up] and said, "My dad wants to know if your car can outrun a bullet."

Such threats are an aggressive way to police the symbolic boundary between whites and Latinos. Nathan noted that he was driving a "decent car,"



preemptively asserting his financial stability and ruling out class status as the reason for the father's extreme measures. Coming from a similar class status, this interaction highlights the centrality of race, class status not serving as a protection against racism (Feagin and Sikes 1994). While younger cohorts are more racially tolerant than older cohorts (Taylor et al. 2006), white parents vigilantly police racial boundaries through surveillance and violence.

. . . In keeping with this gendered rationale, among interviewees, most reported incidents of violence were directed against minority men, mainly by relatives of white women reacting violently to cross-racial intimacy. Fifty-two-year-old Mexican American, Rob Esposito, also from Kansas, told a tale similar to Nathan's of white parents' prohibition against interracial dating. In this situation, both the girl and her brother who defended her were injured:

We were going to go to prom together . . . [but] her dad wouldn't let us date. . . . She was pretty adamant about wanting to date me. . . . Her dad [threw] her down the stairs . . . when they were fighting about it. [Her brother] intervened and . . . his dad pushed his head through a glass bookcase. All over me—because [her] dad was no way going to let [her] date a Mexican.

While the violence was not directed at a minority male, the action served to discipline romantic tastes and oversee white women's sexuality. Rob did not address whether this violence forced a breakup. In general, he stated, "[the girls] wanted to date me, their fathers were the problem." Given the categorical rejection coming from white girls' parents, he retrospectively called white girls "prohibited fruit."

White parents considered Rob a threat to their daughters—a source of hypermasculinity and status contamination—yet they lauded him as a star athlete. Collins (2004) argues that the same minority masculinity that is deemed physically and sexually menacing is cheered when displayed

as athletic prowess. White girls' parents approved of Rob in sports:

After a ball game . . . and scoring 25 points . . . I'd go into the local steakhouse . . . [and] parents . . . would order up a hamburger and fries and . . . paid for it. . . . Even the parents that didn't want me going out with their daughters were like, "Great game!" Yeah, but when it came down to dating their daughter, it was . . . "we're not going to let you touch our daughters."

Although praised for sports achievement, Rob encountered disapproval when dating white girls. These conflicting reactions—personal discouragement and public congratulations—show how white parents respond to Latino masculinity: they regulate it in the private domain that contains a white daughter's sexuality but applaud it in a public arena that requires sports skill. Especially in the Kansas context where whites drastically outnumber Latinos, border patrolling to prohibit whites from crossing the racial line is marked by threats and violence.

Region matters less for women than for men: while Latino men were victimized by physical, verbal, and symbolic violence in Kansas, women faced milder forms of rejection in California and Kansas. Latina women were subject to surveillance and racial slights by white parents of romantic interests. Forty-one-year-old Californian Corrina Nuñez's Hispanic identity cost her a boyfriend:

A [white] young man [I was dating] came to school one day and completely avoided me. . . . His brother had gotten mad at him. . . . told his father that he was dating a Hispanic girl and his dad beat him up.

Parents who police the color line when their children were open to romantic boundary crossing show how age, time period, and generation play a role in boundary maintenance (Taylor et al. 2006).

Similarly, confronting white parents' prohibition against their white sons dating a Latina, 41-year-old Kansan Noelle Puente was affronted



by her prom date's parents who refused to meet her. Noelle related her white prom date's parents' rejection:

You know how it's customary that you meet the parents and you take pictures? His parents didn't want to meet me because I was Mexican. . . . I think that that's a pretty important one [life lesson]. . . . When you talk about good enough. . . . I do think a person associates. . . . that with worth. . . . I met his sister. . . . I never met his parents. . . . I know that he really thought a lot of me. . . . But, it wasn't gonna work. . . . The parents didn't even meet me. I'm a second-class citizen.

Prior to the "age of independence" when young adults move away from home and parental authority is diminished, adolescents are subject to family control (Rosenfeld 2009), parents surveilling their children's whereabouts and judging their companions. Particularly during ritualized dating moments, these are lasting racialized messages. Using politicized language likely acquired in college that may have sensitized her to experiences of racialization (Ortiz and Telles 2012), Noelle summed up her prom date's parents' actions as reducing her to a "second-class citizen." This third party punishment was successful; Noelle opted out of the relationship.

Region affects attitudes on interracial intimacy: whites resisted Latinos more vigorously in Kansas than in California. Group size impinges upon racial attitudes: families and communities judge whites' interracial dating practices in a largely white context to be a more glaring and punishable offense than in a locale with a limited white dating pool. Racial heterogeneity both increases the chances for interracial romance and decreases the likelihood of sanctions (Kreager 2008). In diverse California, cross-racial dating was perceived as less unlikely and therefore less transgressive.

Two caveats concerning region and generation in the United States deserve mention. First, while Latino families in both sites encouraged endogamy, exogamy with whites was perceived as a reasonable option in Kansas. Because of the small number of

Hispanics in the area and because of the value of whiteness, Latinos condoned cross-racial intimacy with whites. Twenty-eight-year-old Liz Downing explained the impact of living in a majority-white town: "It'd kind of be a joke that I couldn't date any people that were Mexican in Lawrence, because we were related to most of the Mexican people in Lawrence [laughs]!" Orlando Puente, from Topeka, explained that he dated white women "mainly because there wasn't [sic] very many Mexican girls to date." . . . Because of supply-side demographics, Latino and white intermarriage was understood as a probable outcome in Kansas.

Second, generational status is influential: immigrants favor endogamy whereas the U.S. born are more open to exogamy. . . . One woman's immigrant father was "shocked and appalled" when a white boy came to the house: "What was I doing having a [white] boy come to the door and ask for me? [My father thought]. . . . I must be doing something [sexually] loose." By depicting minority women as morally superior to dominant culture, immigrant parents reaffirm minority self-worth within a context of subordination (Espiritu 2000; Nagel 2000) and encourage endogamy on cultural grounds.

While both Latino men and women underwent racialized processes of learned incompatibility relative to whites, their experiences varied by gender. Men cited cultural mismatch as the chief reason why white women disregarded them. They disciplined their preferences away from white women and used a cultural explanation of Latina women as suitable and family oriented to legitimate their same-race relations. Women engaged in self-discipline by circumventing objectifying stereotypes white men may have by withdrawing from them. These same women, however, in their turn to Latino men, faced different racialized and gendered preconceptions. The critical difference, however, is that imagery Latino men have of Latina women resonated more with these in-married women's beliefs about themselves. Unlike their intermarried counterparts, in-married Latina



women did not complain of domineering fathers or submissive mothers. Instead, endogamously married Latinas had pleasing home lives in their youth and were comfortable with their parents' displays of femininity, masculinity, and culture.

#### **Preserving Relative Group Privilege: Anti-Black Prejudice and Staying in the Racial Middle**

The aim of anti-black prejudice is to avoid slipping down the racial ladder. Anti-black prejudice among Latinas is expressed in axioms such as, "chickens go with chickens," "stick to your own," or direction not to "marry down." As an exertion of power, anti-black prejudice calcifies the boundary between Latinas and blacks and preserves Latinas' relative group privilege.

Less than a quarter of the Latino interviewees dated blacks (two were currently married to biracial blacks) and, of those, women reported more surveillance by family and peer groups than men. The majority of those who dated blacks were darker skinned (skin color code #3 or above), no light-skinned individuals (skin color code #1) reported interracial intimacy with blacks. While black/non-black relationships elicit strong negative reactions generally (Kreager 2008), nearly all of the interviewees who reported surveillance or punishment regarding romance with blacks were Latinas from Kansas. Region and gender intersect such that families in Kansas guarded Latinas against "downward" racial mixing; cross-racial dating with blacks was viewed as an avoidable norm violation in a locale with a large non-black population.

Latinas in Kansas who dated black men did so against family counsel. Adriana Guthrie, age 41, recalled lateral surveillance by her cousins: "I did date a black guy. . . . My cousins kept saying, 'You're brown and you should be with brown people.'" Forty-three-year-old Lorena Cota dated a black man covertly: "I [wasn't] able to tell my family that I was dating an African American. . . . My dad. . . wouldn't have approved. . . . Social pressures [were] to date Caucasian and Hispanic. . . only."

Such "social pressures" include peer surveillance from African American women who treated her as if she was "trying to take away their men." These slights by black women are likely based on black women's expectation of their own endogamy and the lack of "marriageable" black men due to the disappearance of well-paid jobs for black men (Cherlin 2009; Collins 2008) and high rates of incarceration (Pettit 2012; Western 2006). Cassie Hoffman, age 46, who was previously married to a black man, was "a little nervous" to inform her parents of her engagement because, she confessed, "he was black and I didn't know. . . if they would approve or not."

Immigrant parents' expectations of endogamy and anti-black bias compelled 34-year-old Mario Bermudez to conceal his cross-racial romances. Mario, who eventually married a woman with Mexican American and white heritage, likened interracial intimacy to homosexuality to underscore the transgressive quality of such a pairing. Growing up in an ethnic enclave where "everything was Mexican," Mario explained his self-surveillance when dating non-Mexicans:

When I used to bring home. . . a black girl. . . I would never bring her around. . . my whole family. . . Just, say a few *tias* [aunts] who I thought were cool, you know? It's almost like you're gay, kinda. Like. . . you're "coming out". . . The same thing happened with Ana [his half Mexican American, half white wife]: I would only bring her around my three cool *tias* [aunts]. That's not the way it's supposed to be.

For his Mexican immigrant relatives, it was "a big deal" for Mario to date non-Mexicans and he believed that a black woman would never have gained acceptance. While dating a black woman was taboo, marrying a woman with Mexican American descent ensured his "racial authenticity" (Vasquez and Wetzel 2009) within his immigrant family.

Even in non-immigrant families, Latinas in the "racial middle" (O'Brien 2008) of a three-tiered hierarchy execute anti-black prejudice to safeguard



relative privilege and attempt to achieve "honorary white" status (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Haney López 1996). . . . Noelle Puente's father enacted social distancing by transferring her to a Catholic high school to remove her from African Americans and prohibited her to date black men. Noelle recounted:

I knew that dating somebody black wasn't gonna . . . go anywhere . . . I ended up at a bar [on a date with a black man] that my uncle . . . showed up [at] . . . My uncle actually followed us [out]. Then, he tried . . . to beat him up. Then, I was confronted by my dad: "You have a choice. You either choose your family or you choose him."

Noelle never dated the black man again. This formative family experience lies behind Noelle's assertion that "I knew that I would not marry somebody African American." Yet "knowing" that she would not marry a black man did not occur in a vacuum. . . . It was the threat of being ostracized from her family that silenced dissent and produced conformity, both at the moment of Noelle's father's ultimatum and in her years-later marital choice. Her uncle and father performed disciplinary work to police racial boundaries. . . .

Latinos' racial middle status gives rise to racial insecurity, and, in reaction, Latinos use anti-black prejudice to shore up relative privilege. Intramarriage is an escape from marrying into a less privileged racial category. The three-generation Lucero family, headed by Joaquin and Magda, ages 76 and 73, respectively, illustrates how one Mexican-origin family protected their relative racial status position by espousing anti-black prejudice:

*JOAQUIN:* I didn't want [my kids] to run around with just blacks because if there's more than one or two you'll get in trouble. . . .

*MAGDA:* He teaches Haley [granddaughter]: "I don't want you to run around with them or date them [blacks]." But . . . [I think] if the kids want to that's okay. . . .

*JOAQUIN:* It's just trouble for them when they marry blacks. . . . Because [their] kids are

black and then they've got to go with black because other races won't mix so easy.

*MAGDA:* They [non-blacks] still don't treat them very good. . . . On TV they're beating them up and they're shooting them.

Joaquin firmly discouraged romantic ties with African Americans. He refused to relinquish his relative status position privilege through racial mixing: multiracial kids "are black" and therefore "they've got to go with black" as an identity and peer group. The "one-drop rule" that reduces multiraciality to blackness makes interracial dating, marriage, and procreation anathema to Joaquin (Omi and Winant 1994). He distinguished his family from blacks in the hopes of, at best, becoming honorary white and, at least, guarding against slipping down the racial hierarchy. More permissive on interracial dating, Magda's assertion that blacks are not treated well suggests that she was wary of how racial discrimination against blacks could affect her offspring.

In this family we see uninterrupted anti-black prejudice in two generations yet challenges in the youngest (third) generation. Joaquin adamantly opposed his offspring dating blacks, a view untempered by socioeconomic status: "My personal view is that I wouldn't want them [granddaughters] to marry a black even if he was a millionaire or a multi-millionaire because he would still be black." Race clearly trumps class in this judgment. Nathan Lucero, the 51-year-old son of Joaquin and Magda who intermarried with a white woman, received anti-black admonitions from his father. He recalled, "My dad [is] really old-school. He goes, 'There are no beautiful black people. . . .' I'm sure if I would have brought home a black girl, Dad would have been upset." Nathan's 49-year-old sister Myra, who married and divorced a white man, recollected the racial rule setting in her home: "We knew that we were not going to date a black. . . . Indians were . . . seen as drunks. Asians weren't even around. So it was pretty much you were just going to marry brown or white." . . .



Continuing anti-black racism grounded in his belief that Latinos are more culturally similar to whites than blacks (Lee and Bean 2010), Nathan urged his daughter Haley away from black men: "I said, 'You've got this wide range. . . Asian, Indian, and white. . . You're telling me you can't find anyone in between this range?' . . . I prefer anywhere between Mexican and white. . . ." In outlining the acceptable "range," Nathan's fatherly surveillance forbid straying into blackness. He delimited the dating options for his daughters (as did his high school girlfriend's white father, ironically), promoting the middle and upper ranks of the racial hierarchy. Yet 17-year-old Haley was attracted to men who are half black, showing how tolerance for intermarriage is strongly correlated with age (Passel, Wang, and Taylor 2010). Upon learning her penchant for mixed-race black men, her father cautioned: "I don't know what that's gonna look like! Just remember the genetics." . . .

Skin color is an important dimension to endogamy, as intensity of disciplined preferences varies by skin tone. . . . Darker-skinned parents advocated endogamy for their children, despite their recognition of the social value of whiteness. Oscar Cota, bearing medium-tan skin, counseled his three pre-teen children on intragroup relations: "Would race play a role? Unfortunately, it would . . . I would [prefer] to have my kids marry a Hispanic, a Latina, or a Mexican. . . I would push to keep . . . a pure bloodline. . . That's . . . a prejudice." Experiencing "daily racism," Oscar may have viewed endogamy as a protective device that would shield his children from more integrated social spaces that would make them vulnerable to racial discrimination (Ortiz and Telles 2012). Looking both "up" and "down" from the racial middle, by favoring endogamy, Oscar also guarded against status loss that threatens to accompany interracial intimacy with blacks.

Marriage advice encouraging racial endogamy among darker-skinned Latinos is not gender specific. Noelle Puente, who has medium-tan skin, remarked: "Would I like to have a minority walk

through my household? Sure, I would. I can't help that. I do want [my children] to bring somebody home that's Mexican. . . . Honestly, I think it's [about] family." This logic hints at not only a racial and color mismatch but also a cultural one, positioning Mexican culture as more family oriented than other racial groups. Similarly, 53-year-old Mexican immigrant Rosalinda Ornales, who also has medium-tan skin and lives in California, remarked: "I would like to see [my children] with somebody Latino. That's my opinion. . . . My dad used to say: '*Gallinas se juntan con gallinas*.' Chickens go with chickens. . . . You look for your own kind." Coming from darker-skinned Latinos who intramarried, this marital advice suggests prior racializing experiences that disciplined them into abiding by the color line and shaped the disciplining counsel they give to the next generation. . . .

Complementing the finding that darker-skinned Latinos were more committed to endogamy, families pushed lighter-skinned Latinos toward exogamy in order to "whiten" the race. While Xochitl Velasco, discussed above, ultimately married a Bolivian for cultural compatibility and racial/gender comfort reasons, her family communicated that she, as a light-tan-skinned woman, could improve her racial standing through intermarriage with a white person. A perceptible grade lighter than the aforementioned interviewees who practiced and advocated endogamy, Xochitl's family telegraphed a clear message about the racial hierarchy and the potential achievement of higher racial status through intimacy:

When [my cousins] brought white boyfriends home it was kind of . . . like, "Congratulations!" . . . The white men were considered . . . moving up, successful . . . [It] would never be appreciated to bring an African American man . . . [or] woman home as a boyfriend/girlfriend. . . . And the Mexican men were looked . . . on as . . . status quo and not doing anything really great.

Like commitment to endogamy, familial pressure varies by skin color: darker-skinned Latinos



were steered toward endogamy whereas lighter-skinned Latinos were directed toward exogamy with whites. These intrafamily, intergenerational messages are laced with implications about who is consigned to racialization versus who is best positioned to escape it. Skin color is an important factor in the construction of disciplined preferences, family counsel pivoting the lighter skinned toward whites, the darker skinned toward Latinos, and all away from blacks.

Intergenerational family advice about the acceptability of other racial groups, a form of surveillance and discipline, extends our understanding of endogamy. "What about the kids" rhetoric is a powerful tool of intrafamilial discipline aimed to contain sexual desire within acceptable, endogamous limits. Pressure not to "marry down" is intended to entrench symbolic boundaries and preserve relative group privilege. Anti-black prejudice is the means by which Latinos protect their racial status that, while subordinate to whites, is superior to blacks, an even less privileged group.

### **Conclusion: Racial Border Patrolling and Disciplined Preferences Enforce Endogamy**

Even as rates of intermarriage modestly increase—approximately 13 percent of American marriages involve persons of different races (Bean and Stevens 2003; Lee and Bean 2004: 228)—interracial intimacy remains rare. Studying endogamy brings to light enduring social dynamics that undergird this pattern. . . . This study reveals that what we customarily think of as "personal preferences" are, in fact, socially constructed. Family- and peer-disciplining processes consolidate group position and maintain symbolic boundaries. Surveillance, physical and symbolic violence, and notions of cultural (in)compatibility are all mechanisms of power that support endogamy.

. . . I find that surveillance and punishment (violence, threats, censure, and advice) imposed from inside and outside of one's racial community that

transform into self-discipline are the chief mechanisms enforcing same-race romance. Endogamous pairings do not occur by accident; they are constructed by a racialized social structure whose members police racial boundaries and punish transgressors. Surveillance, punishment, and self-discipline are the regulatory techniques that define acceptability, discipline preferences, and perpetuate endogamy.

Third parties use multiple techniques to advance the "racial project" (Omi and Winant 1994) of intramarriage, yet attitudes and behaviors supporting endogamy differ along the lines of region, gender, skin color, and generation. Latino interviewees viewed interracial dating with whites a real potentiality in Kansas where there were fewer Latinos than in California. Further, white kin of Latinos' romantic interests patrolled boundaries in a gendered fashion, punishing Latino men more severely for racial transgressions than women because of the greater perceived acceptability of Latina women and the instinct to protect white womanhood. Skin color also influences the experience of self-discipline: the darker skinned more rigorously practice and advocate same-race romantic partnerships than their lighter-skinned counterparts who are closer to whiteness and more likely to intermarry with whites (Qian 2002). Generational status in the United States also informs attitudes about interracial relations, later generations (which coincides with younger age, in this case) more tolerant of cross-racial romance. . . .

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is endogamy? What role does residential segregation play in Latinos' dating preferences, especially those without a college education? Although not the focus here, how does residential segregation result from interaction? Provide specific examples.
2. Who disciplined Latinos into preferring other Latinos romantically, and what did they do? What role did racial stereotypes about Latinos play, and how were they different for men and women? Why did Latino men face harsher racial judgements than Latina women? How did endogamy differ between California and Kansas? Across generations?
3. Latinos preferred to marry whites over blacks. How did this preference come to be? Who surveilled Latinas' dating choices, and how?
4. What role did skin tone play in dating preferences?
5. Not only did others—family members, peers inside of and outside of their racial-ethnic group—police Latinos' dating preferences, but many Latinos came to prefer dating other Latinos themselves. How and why?
6. Think back to your days in high school, or examine the dining room or student union at your current institution. Draw out the configuration of where groups sit and label each group. Why do people tend to sit in recognizable groups? How were you able to identify the various groups? How do groups broadcast to others that they are "together"? What happens when someone new joins a group?



## Protecting the Routine from Chaos

DANIEL CHAMBLISS

Many contemporary social organizations are considered bureaucratic. They are characterized by various units and positions with specific duties, clearly defined lines of authority, formal rules and procedures, and mountains of forms and records. Although such bureaucratic organizations seem to have a life of their own, they do not. Individuals give them life by engaging in recurrent patterns of interaction. This life does not result from people merely following the formal rules and procedures of the organization or its specific units. People must interactionally accomplish the order that those rules and procedures imply. They rely on more implicit and informal procedures for that purpose.

This selection by Daniel Chambliss examines the implicit and informal procedures that nurses follow to accomplish order in a hospital setting, particularly when unexpected or traumatic events threaten to disrupt their orderly routines. Based on a ten-year participant observation study, Chambliss chronicles the traumas and threats that have the potential to create chaos for nurses as they go through their daily rounds. These threats present themselves in two forms. The first is external to the nurse and usually involves intrusion by an outsider, such as the entrance of a panicked family member during a resuscitation effort. The second arises within the nurse and consists of disruptive emotions, such as panic or grief, which he or she may experience when dealing with a severe trauma. These emotional reactions are problematic for the nurse because they

can prevent him or her from staying composed and performing essential tasks.

To address these challenges and protect their social world from chaos, nurses rely on a variety of strategies, including following established routines, preventing outsiders from knowing what is happening, and using humor to distance themselves from the events at hand. But, when these strategies fail and chaos threatens to overwhelm the order of the hospital, nurses typically respond by "keeping going." That is, they continue to work and remain calm, employing techniques that allow them to handle disruptions in ways that make them seem routine and manageable. As Chambliss points out, by routinizing the chaos that emerges around them, nurses "modify what counts as normal" and transform the moral world of everyday life. In the process, they not only redefine the reality of trauma and emergency but also create and sustain a sense of order in the social world of the hospital.

While Chambliss focuses on how order is constructed in the sometimes chaotic context of a hospital, his findings demonstrate the crucial insight that social order is a negotiated process. As Herbert Blumer implied in Selection 28, social order emerges out of, and becomes altered through or sustained by, our ongoing interactions with others. When we look at any organization, whether it is a hospital, a business, or a university, we find that it depends on individuals engaging in behavioral routines and interacting with one

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*another in particular ways. However, it is not simply these routines and interactions that create the structure of that organization but rather their sedimentation into a system of action that individuals view as appropriate. In this sense, we are all like the nurses who Chambliss describes—we carve out and preserve a sense of order, albeit somewhat fragile, through our ongoing interactions and behavioral routines.*

Every unit in the hospital, then, has its own normality, its own typical patients, number of deaths, and crises to be faced. But just as predictably, every unit has its emergencies that threaten the routine and challenge the staff's ability to maintain workaday attitudes and practices. Emergencies threaten the staff's ability to carry on as usual, to maintain their own distance from the patient's suffering, and to hold at bay their awe at the enormity of events. Occasionally breakdowns occur in unit discipline or the ability to do the required work.

Staff follow several strategies when trying to manage the threat of breakdowns; they will keep outsiders outside, follow routinization rituals, or use humor to distance themselves. Finally, even when all efforts fail, they will keep going, no matter what. Consider in turn each of these implicit maxims:

**1. Keep Outsiders Outside.** Every hospital has policies about visiting hours, designed not only to "let patients rest" but also to protect staff from outsiders' interference in their work. Visitors are limited to certain hours, perhaps two to a patient room for fifteen-minute visits; they may have to be announced before entering the unit or may be kept waiting in a room down the hall. No doubt many such policies are good for the patient. No doubt, too, they keep visitors out of the nurse's way, prevent too many obtrusive questions or requests for small services, and prevent curious laypersons from seeing the messier, less presentable sides of nursing care.

When visitors cannot be physically excluded, they can still be cognitively controlled, that is, prevented from knowing that something untoward is

happening. Typically, the staff behave in such episodes as if everything were OK, even when it is not. This is similar to what Erving Goffman observed in conversations: when the shared flow of interaction is threatened by an accidental insult or a body failure such as a sneeze or flatulence, people simply try to ignore the break in reality and carry on as if nothing has happened. Such "reality maintenance" is often well-orchestrated, requiring cooperation on the part of several parties. For Goffman, normal people in normal interactions accept at face value each other's presentation of who they are:

A state where everyone temporarily accepts everyone else's line is established. This kind of mutual acceptance seems to be a basic structural feature of interaction, especially the interaction of face-to-face talk. It is typically a "working" acceptance, not a "real" one. (Goffman 1967: 11)

And when this routine breaks down, the immediate strategy is simple denial:

When a person fails to prevent an incident, he can still attempt to maintain the fiction that no threat to face has occurred. The most blatant example of this is found where the person acts as if an event that contains a threatening expression has not occurred at all (Goffman 1967: 17–18).

In the hospital, the unexpected entrance of outsiders into a delicate situation can disrupt the staff's routine activities and create unmanageable chaos. To avoid this, the staff may pretend to outsiders that nothing special is happening; this pretense itself can be part of the routine. During a code (resuscitation) effort I witnessed, there were three such potential disruptions by outsiders: another patient calling for help, a new incoming patient being wheeled in, and the new patient's family members entering the unit. All three challenges were handled by the staff diverting the outsiders from the code with a show, as if nothing were happening:

Code in CCU [Cardiac Care Unit] . . . woman patient, asystole [abnormal ventricle contractions].



Doc (res[ident]) pumping chest—*deep* pumps, I'm struck by how far down they push. Serious stuff. Matter of factness of process is striking. This was a surprise code, not expected. Patient was in Vtak [ventricular fibrillation], pulse started slowing, then asystole. N[urse]s pumping for a while, RT [Respiratory Therapist] ambu-bagging [pumping air into lungs]. Maybe 7–8 people in patient's room working. Calm, but busy. Occasionally a laugh.

Pt in next room (no more than 10 feet away) called for nurse—a doc went in, real loose and casual, strolled in, pt said something; doc said, "There's something going on next door that's taking people's time; we'll get to you"—real easy, like nothing at all happening. Then strolls back to code room. Very calm. . . .

Two N[urse]s came into unit wheeling a new patient. One said, "Uh, oh, bad time," very quietly as she realized, going in the door, that a code was on. Somebody said, "Close the door"—the outside door to the unit, which the Ns with the new pt were holding open. . . .

When the new pt was brought in and rolled into his room, the family with him was stopped at unit door, told to stay in waiting room and "we'll call you" with a casual wave of hand, as if this is routine. [No one said a code was on. Patient lying on gurney was wheeled in, went right by the code room and never knew a thing.] [Field Notes]

This is a simple example of protecting the routine from the chaos of a panicking patient or a horrified family; the outsiders never knew that a resuscitation was occurring fifteen feet away. The staff's work was, in their own eyes, routine; their challenge was protecting that routine from outside disruption.

**2. Follow Routinization Rituals.** The staff's sense of routine is maintained by the protective rituals of hospital life. Under stress, one may use them more and more compulsively, falling back on the old forms to convince oneself that order is still present. Frantic prayers in the foxhole are the prototype cases.

Most prominent of such rituals in hospitals are "rounds," the standard ritual for the routine handling of patient disasters in the hospital. "Rounds" is the generic term for almost any organized staff group discussion of patients' conditions. "Walking rounds" refers to a physician walking through the hospital, usually trailed by various residents and interns, going from patient to patient and reviewing their condition. "Grand rounds" are large meetings of the medical staff featuring the presentation of an interesting case, with elaborate discussion and questions, for the purpose of education and review of standard practices. Nursing rounds usually consist of a meeting between the staff for one (outgoing) shift reporting to the staff of the next (incoming) shift on the condition of all patients on the floor. Here the staff collectively explains what has happened and why, bringing every case into the staff's framework of thinking, and systematically enforcing the system's capability for handling medical problems without falling to pieces. In rounds, the staff confirm to each other that things are under control. Once a week, for instance, the Burn Unit at one hospital holds rounds in their conference room with a group of residents, one or two attendings, several nurses, the social workers, dieticians, and physical therapists. The patients here are in terrible shape; one can sometimes hear moans in the hallway outside as patients are taken for walks by the nurses. But rounds continue:

Macho style of the docs very evident. . . . Resident will present a case, then the attendings take rapid-fire shots at what he [the resident] had done: wrong dressing, wrong feeding schedule, failure to note some abnormality in the lab results. Much of the talk was a flurry of physiological jargon, many numbers and abbreviations. The intensity of the presentation, the mercilessness of the grilling, is surprising. . . . Focus is on no errors made in situation of extreme pressure—i.e., both in patient treatment and then here in rounds presenting the case. Goal here is to be predictable, controlled, nothing left out. [Field Notes]



3. *Use Humor to Distance Yourself.* Keeping outsiders away and following the standard rituals for maintaining normality can help, but sometimes the pathos of hospital life becomes psychologically threatening to staff members. One response is to break down, cry, and run out, but this is what they are trying to avoid; the more common reaction is the sort of black humor that notoriously characterizes hospitals and armies everywhere. Humor provides an outlet; when physical space is not available, humor is a way to separate oneself psychologically from what is happening. It says both that I am not involved and that this really isn't so important. (In brain surgery, when parts of that organ are, essentially, vacuumed away, one may hear comments like "There goes 2d grade, there go the piano lessons," etc.) With laughter, things seem less consequential, less of a burden. What has been ghastly can perhaps be made funny:

Today they got a 600-gram baby in the Newborn Unit. When Ns heard [the baby] was in Delivery, they were praying, "Please God let it be under 500 grams"—because that's the definite cutoff under which they won't try to save it—but the doc said admit it anyway. Ns unhappy.

I came in the unit tonight; N came up to me and said brightly, with a big smile, "Have you seen our Fetus?" Ns on the Newborn Unit have nicknames for some. There's "Fetus," the 600-gram one; "Munchkin"; and "Thrasher," in the corner, the one with constant seizures. Grim humor, but common. ["Fetus" was born at 24 weeks, "Munchkin" at 28.] [Field Notes]

The functions of such humor for medical workers have been described in a number of classic works of medical sociology. Renée Fox, writing in her book *Experiment Perilous* about physicians on a metabolic research unit, says, "The members of the group were especially inclined to make jokes about events that disturbed them a good deal," and she summarizes that

by freeing them from some of the tension to which they were subject, enabling them to achieve greater detachment and equipoise, and strengthening their resolve to do something about the problems with which they were faced, the grim medical humor of the Metabolic Group helped them to come to terms with their situation in a useful and professionally acceptable way. (Fox 1974: 80–82)

Fox and other students of hospital culture (notably Rose Coser [1980]) have emphasized that humor fills a functional purpose of "tension release," allowing medical workers to get on with the job in the face of trauma; their analyses usually focus on jokes explicitly told in medical settings. This analysis is correct as far as it goes, but in a sense I think it almost "explains away" hospital humor—as if to say that "these people are under a lot of strain, so it's understandable that they tell these gruesome jokes." It suggests, in a functionalist fallacy, that jokes are made because of the strain and that things somehow aren't "really" funny.

But they are. An appreciation of hospital life must recognize that funny things—genuinely funny, even if sometimes simultaneously horrible—do happen. Hospitals are scenes of irony, where good and bad are inseparably blended, where funny things happen, where to analytically excuse laughter as a defense mechanism is simultaneously to deny the human reality, the experience, that even to a nonstressed outsider *this is funny*. The humor isn't found only in contrived jokes but in the scenes one witnesses; laughter can be spontaneous, and it's not always nervous. True, one must usually have a fairly normalized sense of the hospital to laugh here, but laugh one does.

Certainly, the staff make jokes:

In the OR:

"This is his [pt's] 6th time [for a hernia repair]."

"After two, I hear you're officially disabled."

"Oh good, does that mean he gets a special parking place?" [Field Notes]



In the ICU, two Ns—one male, one female—working on pt.

Nurse 1 (male): "This guy has bowel sounds in his scrotum."

Nurse 2 (female): "In his scrotum?"

Nurse 1: "Yeah, didn't you pick that up?"

Nurse 2: "I didn't put my stethoscope there!" (Big laughs.) [Field Notes]

Sometimes jokes are more elaborate and are obviously derived from the tragedy of the situation:

In another ICU, staff member taped a stick to the door of the unit, symbolizing (for them) "The Stake," a sign of some form of euthanasia [perhaps the expression sometimes used, "to stake" a patient, derives from the myth that vampires can only be killed by driving a stake through the heart]. Periodically word went around that a resident had just won the "Green Stake Award," meaning that he or she had, for the first time, allowed or helped a patient to die. [Field Notes]

Some colorful balloons with "Get Well Soon" were delivered to a patient's room. The patient died the following night. Someone on the staff moved the balloons to the door of another patient's room; that patient died! Now the staff has put the balloons at the door of the patient they believe is "most likely to die next." [Field Notes]

But jokes have to be contrived; they are deliberate efforts at humor and so make a good example of efforts to distance oneself, or to make the tragic funny. But the inherent irony of the hospital is better seen in situations that spontaneously provoke laughter. These things are funny in themselves; even an outsider can laugh at them:

Nurse preparing to wheel a patient into the OR tells him, "Take out your false teeth, take off your glasses . . ." and continuing, trying to make a joke, "Take off your leg, take out your eyes." The patient said, "Oh, I almost forgot—" and pulled out his [false] eye! [Interview]

Or:

Lady patient [Geriatric floor] is upset because she called home, there's no answer; she's afraid her husband has died. Sylvia [a nurse] told her he probably just went somewhere for lunch, but patient said he would have called. She's afraid.

[Later] Sylvia went back in lady's room—she's crying. Husband called! Sylvia happy, smiling, "You should be happy!" "But," says the old lady, "he called to say he was out burying the dog!"

Sylvia had to leave the room because she was starting to laugh; she and Janie laughing at this at the N's station, saying it's really sad but funny at the same time. [Field Notes]

Or:

In looking at X-rays of a patient's colon, the resident explains to the team a shadow on the film: "Radiology says it could be a tumor, or it might just be stool." Jokes all around about how "helpful" Rays [Radiology] is. [Field Notes]

One needn't be under pressure to find such things funny. People do laugh to ease pressure or to distance oneself. But sometimes the distance comes first: laughter is made possible by the routinization that has gone before.

**4. When Things Fall Apart, Keep Going.** Sometimes routinization fails: outsiders come into the room and, seeing their dead mother, break down, screaming and wailing; or a longtime, cared-for patient begins irretrievably to "decompensate" and lose blood pressure, sliding quickly to death; or emergency surgery goes bad, the trauma shakes the staff, and there are other patients coming in from the ambulances. Any of these can destroy the staff's sense of "work as usual." In such cases, the typical practice seems to be, remarkably: just keep going. Trauma teams specialize in the psychological strength (or coldbloodedness, perhaps) to continue working when the world seems to be falling apart. Finally, nurses and physicians are notable



for continuing to work even, in the final case, after the patient is for almost all purposes dead, or will be soon.

A resident said to the attending on one floor, discussing a terminal patient: "If we transfuse him, he might get hepatitis."

Another resident: "By the time he gets hepatitis he'll be dead."

Attending: "OK, so let's transfuse." [Field Notes]

Perseverance is a habit; it's also a moral imperative, a way of managing disaster as if it were routine.

In every unit there are nurses known for being good under pressure. These are people who, whatever their other skills (and, typically, their other skills are quite good), are able to maintain their presence of mind in any crisis. Whereas "being organized" is a key quality for nurses in routine situations, staying calm is crucial in emergency situations. Compare two nurses known for remaining calm (Mavis and Anna) to two others who are prone to alarm (Linda and Julie):

Mavis [in Neonatal IGU] is cited as a good nurse (great starting IVs, e.g.) who doesn't get shook, even in a code, even if her pt is dying, she still keeps doing what you're supposed to do. Linda, by contrast, is real smart, very good technically, but can freak out, start yelling, etc., if things are going badly. [Field Notes]

Julie [in Medical ICU], hurrying around, looks just one step ahead of disaster, can't keep up, etc. Doc says something about the patient in room 1. Julie says, walking past, "He's not mine," keeps going. But Anna, calm, walks in pt's room—pt with oxygen mask, wants something. Anna goes out, calmly, comes back in a minute w/cup of crushed ice, gives pt a spoonful to ease thirst. She *always* seems to be doing that little thing that others "don't have time for"—never flustered and yet seems to get more done than anyone else. [Field Notes, Interview]

But to "keep going" depends not so much on the individual fortitude of nurses such as Mavis and

Anna, but on the professional and institutional habits of the nursing staff and the hospital. The continuance of care even in the face of obvious failure of efforts is itself a norm. Whatever one's personal disposition, one keeps working; the staff keep working, often when the patient is all but dead, or "dead" but not officially recognized as such:

Dr. K., walking rounds with four residents, discussing a 30-year-old male patient, HIV-positive, gone totally septic [has bloodstream infection, a deadly problem], no hope at all of recovery—Dr. K. says this is a "100 percent mortality" case; so they decide how to proceed with minimal treatment, at the end of which Dr. K. says brightly, "And if he codes—code him!" [Field Notes]

Coding such a patient is an exercise in technique; there is no hope entailed, no optimism, no idea that he might be saved. There is only the institutional habit which substitutes for hope, which in many cases obviates the staff's pessimism or lack of interest. When standard procedure is followed, courage is unnecessary. It is one thing to be routinely busy, caring for vegetative patients; it happens every day. It is quite another to handle emergency surgery with no time and a life at stake. Sometimes such a case will challenge all the staff's resources—their personal fortitude, their habitualization of procedures, the self-protection offered by an indefatigable sense of humor. To maintain one's composure while under tremendous pressures of time and fatefulness requires all the courage a staff can muster.

One such case was that of emergency surgery on a thirty-five-year-old woman who came to Southwestern Regional hospital in severe abdominal pain; she was diagnosed with a ruptured ectopic pregnancy estimated at sixteen weeks. The case provides us with a dramatic example of the pressure placed on the staff to retain their composure in the face of disaster.

The long description which follows is graphic. The scene was more than bloody; it was grotesque. More than one staff member—including one member of



the surgical team itself—left the room during the operation, sickened. Other nurses, even very experienced ones, told me they have never witnessed such a scene and hope never to witness one. I include it here, in some detail, to exemplify both what health professionals face in their work and how, incredibly, some of them can carry on. The description is reconstructed from Field Notes (some written at the time on the inside of a surgical mask, some on sheets of paper carried in a pocket), and from interviews afterward with participants:

Saturday night OR suite; hasn't been busy. Only one case so far, a guy who got beat up with a tire iron (drug deal), finished about 8:30 P.M. It's about 10:00. 2 Ns—the Saturday night staff—sitting around in the conference room, just chatting and waiting for anything that happens.

Call comes over intercom: ruptured tubal (pregnancy) just came in OR, bringing to the crash room. 35-year-old black woman, very heavy—250 pounds maybe—apparently pregnant for 16 weeks, which means she's been in pain for 10 weeks or more without coming in. Friends brought her to ER screaming in pain. Blood pressure is at "60 over palpable," i.e., the diastolic doesn't even register on the manometer. She's obviously bleeding bad internally, will die fast if not opened up. Ns run to OR and set up fast. I've never seen people work so quickly here, no wasted motion at all. This is full speed *emergency*.

When patient is rolled in, fully conscious, there are more than a dozen staff people in the room, including three gynecological surgery residents, who will operate; all three are women. The surgeons are scrubbed and gowned and stand in a line, back from the table, watching without moving, the one in charge periodically giving orders to the nurses who are setting up. At one point there are twelve separate people working on the patient—IVs going into both arms, anesthesiologist putting mask on pt to gas, nurse inserting a Foley [bladder] catheter, others tying pt's arms to the straightout arms of the table, others scrubbing

the huge belly, an incredible scene. The patient is shaking terribly, in pain and fear. Her eyes are bugging out, looking around terribly fast. She's whimpering, groaning as needles go in, crying out softly. No one has time even to speak to her; one nurse briefly leans over and speaks into her ear something like "try not to worry, we're going to take care of you," but there is no time for this. I've never seen anyone so afraid, sweating and crying and the violent shaking.

As soon as they have prepped her—the belly cleansed and covered with Opsite, in a matter of minutes, very, very fast, the anesthesiologist says, "All set?" And someone says "yes," and they gas her. I'm standing right by her head, looking to the head side of the drape which separates her head from her body; the instant that her eyes close, I look to the other side—and the surgeon has already slit her belly open. No hesitation at all, maybe before the patient was out.

What happened next, more extraordinary than the very fast prep, was the opening. Usually in surgery the scalpel makes the skin cut, then slowly scissors are used, snipping piece by piece at muscle, the Bovie cauterizing each blood vessel on the way, very methodical and painstaking. This was nothing like that. It was an entirely different style. They cut fast and deep, sliced her open deep, just chopped through everything, in a—not a panic, but something like a "blitzkrieg," maybe—to get down into the Fallopian tube that had burst and was shooting blood into the abdomen.

When they first got into the abdominal cavity, usually there would be some oozing blood; here as they opened blood splattered out all over the draping on the belly. It was a godawful mess, blood everywhere. They had one surgeon mopping up with gauze sponges, another using a suction pump, a little plastic hose, trying to clean the way. Unbelievable. They got down to the tubes, reaching down and digging around with their hands. And then they found it—suddenly out of this bloody



mess down in the abdomen, with the surgeons groping around trying to feel where things were, out of this popped up, right out of the patient and, literally, onto the sheet covering her, the 16-week fetus itself. Immediately one surgeon said mock-cheerfully, "It's a boy!" "God, don't do that," said the scrub tech, turning her head away.

The scrub tech then began to lose it, tears running down her cheeks. Two other people on the team—there were maybe six around the table—said about the same time, nearly together, "Damien!" and "Alien!" recalling recent horror movies, "children of the devil" themes. The fetus lay on the sheet just below the open abdomen for a few moments. The head surgery resident, working, just kept working. The scrub tech should have put the fetus into a specimen tray, but she was falling to pieces fast, crying, and starting to have trouble handing the proper tools to the surgeon, who said something like, "What are you doing?" At this point the circulating nurse, a man, said, "If nobody else will do it," picked up the fetus and put it in a specimen tray, which he then covered with a towel and put aside. He then told another nurse to help him into a gown—he wasn't scrubbed. This violates sterile technique badly, for him to start handling tools, but the scrub tech was becoming a problem. The circulating nurse then quickly gowned and gloved, gently pulled the scrub tech aside and said, "I'll do it." The scrub tech ran out of the room in tears. And the circulating nurse began passing tools to the surgeons himself. It is the circulating nurse's responsibility to handle problems this way, and he did. Another nurse had gone out to scrub properly, and when she came back, maybe ten minutes later, she gowned and gloved and relieved him; so he (the circulating nurse) went back to his regular job of charting the procedure, answering the phone, etc.

By this time, things were under control; the bleeding was stopped, the tube tied off. The other tube was OK and left alone so the pt can get pregnant again. The blood in the abdomen was cleaned

up—over 1500 cc's were lost, that's just under a half-gallon of blood. The pt would have died fast if they hadn't gotten in there.

Within two hours after the patient had first rolled in, the room was quiet, only three staff members left, two surgeons and the scrub nurse closing up and talking quietly. Most of the mess—the bloody sponges, the used tools, and all—was gone, cleared away, and all the other staff people, including the chief surgeon, had left. Very calm. The patient, who two hours ago was on the end of a fast terrible death, will be out of the hospital in two days with no permanent damage beyond the loss of one Fallopian tube. [Field Notes, Interviews]

In this situation, we can see two somewhat distinct problems in maintaining the routine order of things: first, the challenge simply in getting the work done; and second, the challenge of upholding the moral order of the hospital. The first issue was resolved by replacing the scrub tech so the operation could continue. The second issue is trickier. The scrub tech's response appeared to be set off not by the horror of what she saw—the bloody fetus—but by the reaction of the assisting surgeon—"It's a boy!" I can only guess that the joke was too much for her. In continuing to work without her, and continuing without noticeable change of demeanor, the surgical team was asserting not only the imperative to protect the operational routine but also, I think, to protect the moral order of emergency surgery as well. That order includes:

1. The job comes first, before personal reactions of fear or disgust.
2. Cynicism is an acceptable form of expression if it helps to maintain composure and distance.
3. The medical team is rightfully in charge and above what may be happening in the OR.
4. Preserving life is the central value; others (such as niceties of language or etiquette) fall far behind.



There is clearly a morality here. Just as clearly, it is not the morality of everyday life.

### Conclusion: The Transformation of the Moral World

... In concluding, I would like to make two final points: first, that every nurse does set limits to what she can tolerate; and second, that routinization entails a transformation of the moral world. Routinization entails an implicit decision to modify what counts as normal. In the hospital, what was sacred (handling and inspection of bodies) becomes ordinary; what was unique (the human being with a disease) becomes just another case; what was serious (the death of a pet, the resuscitation of a dying old man) becomes funny; what was grotesque or disgusting (facial fungi, necrotic stumps) becomes a tale to tell over lunch. Instead of tying old people to bed rails, nurses "restrain" them; instead of doping up a crazy lady, they "sedate a confused patient." In becoming a nurse, then, one transforms important elements of one's moral world. The transformation is based on specific learning, as we have seen, but there is more to it than that. Routinization is more than the sum of many specific concrete activities (although it is that); it really does seem, finally, to happen "one day," as the nurses put it. Their "frame" has shifted, to use Erving Goffman's 1974 term. What in daily life would be outrageous—a body sliced by a knife, a throat invaded with a metal tube—in the medical context becomes normal, a relatively routine procedure.

This is why so much of conventional debate about medical and nursing ethics is inadequate: the frame shift of routinization has bracketed out a vast array of moral difficulties. Everyday hospital practice does not present itself as the typical "ethics dilemma" discussed by hospital committees of lawyers and doctors and chaplains; it is not typically discussed in philosophy books, or covered in *Time* magazine articles about young women, victims of car accidents, who have been vegetative for

six years. Those cases are dramatic, notable. Many times during my research nurses have asked me if I was meeting with ethics committees, going to official "ethics rounds," or talking with Dr. So-and-So, the renowned "ethics guy" in the hospital. "If you want to know about ethics, you should . . .," they would say. But behind them, just over their shoulders, would be a young man dying of AIDS whose parents refused to visit him; or an old woman, who when not lost in a drugged stupor would beg to die; or a hopelessly deformed infant who hadn't breathed on her own for four months. Committees only hear of such cases if they become problems, and committees are themselves unusual groups. Hence ethics committees and ethics rounds are a poor site for discovering what typically occurs. This is not to say that nurses aren't aware of the problems under their own noses, but often they don't see them as "ethics problems," and neither do the powers that be, nor the media, nor the academics who talk about such things. The great ethical danger, I think, is not that when faced with an important decision one makes the wrong choice, but rather that one never realizes that one is facing a decision at all.

To an outsider the ordinary work of the hospital is itself morally problematic. The bureaucracy of the hospital poses a problem; the "professionalization" of staff has moral implications; the objectification of patients' bodies matters far more than the official "ethics dilemma" which occasionally pops its head above the surrounding routine. In the normal course of "getting used to" the hospital, nurses and other health care workers become in some measure inured to the profound differences between the hospital and the world beyond it. And if this routine is itself morally problematic, this fact is far more important than whether to continue tube feedings to a patient who for half a decade has been comatose.

Routinization—the acceptance of the hospital as a normal place—happens in the course of things, and often the transition itself is unnoticed



("I can't say exactly when it happened"). Readers of this chapter may have undergone a kind of routinization experience during their reading, becoming used to the examples, starting to learn a little of the jargon, seeing one or two of the same faces in these pages, beginning to be less shocked by later hospital scenes than by those in the beginning of the chapter. The readers may have, in a sense, forgotten that hospitals are unusual; it really isn't normal for people to do what is being done in the operating room, or to say what people there say. As the shock value of these stories wears off, the change is not in the stories but in readers' attitudes toward them. And it happened somewhere in the reading.

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#### Reflective Questions

1. What is reality maintenance? How and why do we engage in it?
2. Chambliss argues that hospitals often are sites of humor, even at the same time as something horrible

is happening. What different types of humor took place? What was your reaction to the humor? Why? Would the jokes have been funny in front of family members of the patients? Why or why not? Other sociologists have found people making dark jokes at work in funeral homes and at the diagnosis of an illness. What role does humor play in these settings? Have you participated in dark humor? Where? Under what circumstances?

3. What does Chambliss mean by "When things fall apart, keep going"? Why do doctors code a patient they know is going to die? If perseverance isn't the by-product of one's personality or individual fortitude, what is it?
4. Perhaps you attend one of the many universities or colleges where tuition has risen substantially over the last decade. Or perhaps you pay an increasing share of the cost of your education through tuition, while previous generations enjoyed more generous support of taxpayers. If you are like many students, you may find this unfair, and you may question whether specific courses you take are worth the money or years of debt. In such instances, you may find yourself concluding that a given course has not been worth it to you. Fair enough. Demand your money back and refuse to pay your next tuition bill until you get it. What would happen? What if you went to the departmental, business, or registrar's office and pleaded your case? What would happen? What would happen if you refused to leave until you got your money back? If you ask any individual business office worker, registrar, professor, or campus police officer, he or she likely will tell you that the cost of higher education is exorbitant. Why then is he or she unlikely to help you? What would you have to do to get your money back?



PART  
VIII

## Reproducing and Resisting Inequalities

We often speak of social relationships as if they were things that existed apart from social interaction. We imply this, for example, when we say that we have a certain kind of relationship with someone, such as a friendship. Yet social relationships are not so much something we have as something we do. Social interaction is the source and sustenance of social relationships. Their only existence apart from interaction is in memory and imagination. And even there, they tend to wither away without the nourishment of social interaction.

Our understanding of different kinds of relationships clearly influences how we interact with one another. For example, most of us do not tell checkout clerks in supermarkets intimate details about our private lives. However, it is because we do not do so that our relationship with checkout clerks is fleeting and relatively anonymous. If we did share our intimate secrets with a checkout clerk, and she or he reciprocated, then our relationship would be intimate.

Relationships are ways individuals relate to one another, which is just another way of referring to patterns of social interaction. These patterns serve as the bedrock of social institutions. Indeed, as Herbert Blumer observed in Selection 28, social institutions exist only in and through human interactions and relationships.



Social relationships provide the immediate context of our social lives and experience. They support and challenge our sense of self. They tie us emotionally to others in bonds of mutual obligation. Our positions in networks of relationships determine our social standing in the neighborhood, at school, at work, and even in our families. And, how others relate to us shapes our most personal experiences.

The selections included in Part VIII focus attention on the interactional dynamics of unequal relationships and how they shape our lives and experiences. The selections examine how our daily interactions and the meanings we give to our bodies, selves, and routine practices reproduce and resist unequal relationships. When unequal relationships accumulate over time and space, they result in social structural patterns we call inequalities. Racism and patriarchy are well-known examples.

Inequalities are the unearned advantages enjoyed by certain groups of people at the expense of others. Inequalities do not result from differences in natural abilities or hard work. Nor are they inevitable or somehow naturally occurring, even though they often seem that way. Rather, we *create* them, and they cannot exist without us continuing to do so. Sociological psychologists study inequalities to understand what we each do to reproduce (and challenge) inequalities: how our thinking, acting, and interacting with others provides unearned resources to some but not others. The creation of inequalities can be—and historically often has been—the result of overt bigotry and cruel intentions. But it need not be. And here is where sociological psychology has the most to offer: it allows us to see how perfectly thoughtful and well-meaning people contribute to inequalities *unintentionally* through everyday actions that have hidden consequences.

The selections in Part VIII highlight the following themes about reproducing and resisting inequalities:

- *Inequalities depend on our enforcing symbolic boundaries that position some people as more valuable than others.* Parts I and VII laid the groundwork for understanding how boundary making can transform into inequalities. Distinguishing people from each other and categorizing them according to particular characteristics help us to make sense of the world and coordinate our activities with others. Social categories and identities serve as shortcuts that allow us effectively to navigate ambiguous, complex, and speed-driven social environments.
- *Differentiation leads to inequality when we pair it with social evaluations about people's competence, value, or morality.* We come to associate a particular characteristic, often accompanied by physical markers, with these cultural assessments. We then enter interactions with implicit attitudes and



judgments unknowingly at the ready. Once these judgments are activated, they cloud our interpretations of ourselves and others, as well as our courses of action. We may, in turn, opt to choose one job candidate over another even if they both have similar qualifications. Or we may attribute a negative motive to someone's harmless behavior, like wearing baggy pants. Or we may shape social policy to benefit people we view as "good like us" rather than as "bad" like members of a less powerful group. These routine, everyday judgments and interactions accumulate into widespread differences in opportunities and resources, such as wealth increasingly concentrating in the hands of a few, wage disparities persisting between men and women, and men of color being incarcerated at disproportionately high rates. These disadvantages cannot be sustained without the continued reinforcement of symbolic boundaries.

- *We need not intend for our thoughts and actions to result in inequalities in order for them to do so.* Unequal relationships are what they are because we interactionally make them that way, not because we intend them to be that way. The way we relate to particular others is often guided by unquestioned cultural understandings of what different kinds of relationships and identities should look like. Moreover, we are often invested in unequal relationships. For example, if we are subordinates we may identify with disadvantaged groups, even if others look down on our associations. Powerful others may also give us attention or rewards for acting out stereotypes. Or our financial, cultural, or emotional well-being may depend on keeping these powerful people happy. Protecting our investments then prevents us from questioning resource imbalances, and it encourages us to recreate them. Inequalities are especially difficult to challenge when the actions that create them are hidden behind goodwill or admirable goals. But being sociologically mindful means understanding the consequences of our actions rather than only our intentions.
- *People who are unfairly disadvantaged challenge their own oppression.* Inequalities have an assortment of negative consequences for subordinated people. They lead to resource deprivation, resentment at bad treatment, and damaged self-images. As a result, marginalized people use whatever social, psychological, and material resources they can to challenge their subordination. They resist the negative assessments associated with their identities, for example, and create new positive meanings for being who they are. They also coordinate with other oppressed individuals to challenge gatekeepers who exclude them from opportunities, and they craft their own social agendas





and use political maneuvering to advance them. Even though others may disparage them and cast them off as rejects, the oppressed develop ideologies, identities, and subcultural practices that offer them a sense of orientation and value. They also effect widespread change, as evidenced in the civil rights, feminist, and social welfare movements.

- *Oppressed individuals can contribute to their own and others' marginalization.* Inequalities are most importantly reproduced by the people who benefit from them. Nonetheless, sociological psychologists understand that people often act against their broad group interests. The working class, for example, has mobilized itself in voting campaigns to support candidates and policies that undermine unionizing and redistribute tax benefits to the wealthy. Sociological psychologists ask how and why this happens. While being on the receiving end of social devaluation and restricted resources can produce social cohesion and coordinated resistance, it does not always. Many on the bottom are so busy with the everyday concerns of survival—feeding their families, finding some social meaning—that they have little time and energy for anything else. They also may develop emotional investments that align their interests with the dominant group. Or they may experience more immediate or greater social return from policing symbolic boundaries that position them above some unlucky others. Such was the case with white working-class voters who were not voting against their class interests so much as voting in favor of their racial interests.

By addressing these themes, the selections in Part VIII illustrate how sociological psychology provides us with a valuable perspective for understanding how power and inequality get enacted, negotiated, and resisted in our relationships and identity work. Each of the selections demonstrates how we “do” inequalities whether we fully realize what we are doing or not.





Salvaging Decency

MARGARETHE KUSENBACH

One important way that boundary making transforms into inequality is when one group stigmatizes another in order to define itself as superior. Sociological psychologists call this social process “othering,” which references the creation of a social other. When othering, individuals compare themselves to another group and transform them into a social foil. The dominating group positions the other to be inferior morally, culturally, or in some other socially important way and consequently less deserving of power and status. They then police the symbolic boundary between the in-group—“us”—and the out-group—“them.” People engage in othering to secure their membership in the dominating group and to legitimize the group’s exclusive access to particular resources. Othering creates winners and losers.

History offers countless examples of how othering works. In the nineteenth century, European immigrants claimed their whiteness by socially distancing themselves from blacks, whom they claimed to be morally and intellectually inferior. By framing themselves as whites, immigrants ensured their right to vote and political influence. More recently, politicians used the othering of poor black women to pass welfare reform, the changes instituted in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996. Aid to Dependent Children was a cash entitlement program originally created in 1935 to support single

women so they could care for their children. After numerous legal challenges opened up access to benefits across the next decades, welfare reform in the 1990s added layers of stipulations for receiving cash assistance, including career caps and work requirements. Politicians and middle-class Americans used the stereotypic image of a “welfare queen”—an unemployed single woman of color having children simply to game the system—to distinguish between who should be deserving of anti-poverty assistance and who should not.

In the following selection, Kusenbach examines how mobile home residents deal with one consequence of being othered: social stigma. Our identities are linked to where we live. Middle-class and working-class Americans position themselves more favorably by denigrating trailer living and especially “trailer trash.” The ubiquity of negative images of mobile homes challenges residents’ senses of self-worth and moral decency.

As Kusenbach shows, mobile home residents deal with the stigma of being othered by socially distancing themselves from the images of trailer trash. Kusenbach identifies two ways: bordering and fencing. When bordering, residents reject the trash associations altogether by distinguishing between where they live—and thus the kind of people they are—and stereotypical trailer parks. They frame their own places as resorts, highly regulated communities, and

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family-friendly oases. They point to these differences as evidence that they are nothing like trailer trash. Fencing involves making distinctions within the same locale, thus offering some recognition of trailer trash. Residents who engage in fencing see trashy residents as threats to them from the inside, and they distance themselves from them by claiming to not act or look indecent like they do. They engage in othering against their own group. Which approach subordinates use depends upon their own social resources and how easily they can claim other socially valued identities.

Kusenbach's findings offer two additional sociological psychological lessons. First, our frame of reference—whether we compare up, down, or sideways—is important in determining how we think about ourselves and the people around us. A classic example of this is married women's levels of satisfaction with an unequal division of household labor. Married women with partners who do little housework evaluate their situation very differently depending on the individual against whom they routinely compare their circumstances. A woman who grows up with a miserable mother and a father who did no housework may be satisfied with her husband's small contribution, while the same woman may be dissatisfied if she compares her own arrangement to that of her more progressive friends. She will also be less satisfied if she compares herself directly to her partner, or if her husband's contribution declined once they had children. Subordinates evaluate their circumstances differently depending on their frame of reference. Those who differentiate downward feel better about themselves.

Second, stigmatized individuals do not necessarily develop empathy and compassion for other stigmatized groups. Rather, they often find themselves fighting with each other for resources, as demonstrated by the mobile home residents discussed in this selection. They even employ the same stereotypes used against them to belittle others, thereby reinforcing those very stereotypes. When individuals are left to fight at the bottom, they have less to invest in challenging the othering that denigrates them in the first place.

According to current (2005–2007) estimates by the American Community Survey, approximately 17.9 million people live in 8.7 million mobile homes in the United States. Mobile homes and mobile home residents can be found in every state and region of the country, yet they are most concentrated in the Sunbelt. A record 880,000—or fully 10%—of the nation's mobile homes are located in Florida, where the research for this paper was conducted. Approximately 1.5 million Florida residents, roughly one in twelve, permanently live in mobile homes. . . .

Contemporary popular culture is rife with negative images of people living in mobile homes and provides derogatory names that are utilized by many without quotation marks. Everyone knows that the designation “trailer trash” is not meant as a compliment. The low social prestige of “trailer” living presents a challenge that mobile home residents in Florida and elsewhere routinely encounter in their daily lives. The question of how recipients of these labels manage and deflect their negative, stigmatizing associations provides the thematic focus for this paper. Its larger goal is to contribute to our understanding of the experience of stigmatization, folk conception of decency, symbolic and social differentiation, as well as race and class dynamics. . . .

### Stigma and Mobile Homes in Previous Research

As a subform of identity work, stigma management is generally aimed at avoiding or reducing the impact of a negative image on one's public or private self. According to Goffman (1963, 3ff.), a stigma is a “deeply discrediting attribute” that makes its carriers less desirable and respectable than so-called regular people. Goffman emphasizes that no single characteristic is discreditable in itself yet comes to be viewed as suspicious within the context of historically and culturally specific beliefs. Mobile home residents are prone to experiencing two kinds of stigma described by Goffman: “blemishes of individual character” and “tribal stigma.” These



two kinds of stigma vary in the perceived origin of the discrediting attribute and, accordingly, in the emotions stigmatized individuals might experience, such as shame for blemishes of individual character, or anger in the case of tribal stigma. A stigma's perceived source and embodied meaning are very consequential for how it is managed in interactions with others. The stigma of living in a mobile home is different from some other compromising features in that it allows for passing (Goffman 1963, pp. 73–91). Unlike many bodily and some tribal stigmas, the discrediting attribute—living in a “trailer”—is neither always immediately apparent nor hidden permanently from everyone. Given its hideable, changeable and disembodied aspects, how then can mobile home living become such a serious and hurtful source of indignity? May I suggest three possible explanations.

First, the sharp punch of the trailer stigma lies in the extent to which people consider homes to be symbolic expressions of their identities and social statuses in contemporary society. . . . [H]omes are much more than physical shelters: they are powerful symbols of individual and collective identities and relationships. Denigrations of one's home may thus be felt as a direct assault on one's identity and community, as a symbolic challenge of one's place in society.

Second, the trailer stigma hits hard because of its racial implications. The label “trailer trash” is predominantly aimed at low-income Whites, as frequent combinations with the historic insult “White trash” indicate. . . . [T]his term is most often used by Whites in order to distance themselves from other Whites who are feared and despised because of their economic and physical proximity to minorities. According to Neewitz and Wray (1997), the conception of some people as “trash” not only justifies the marginalization of others who are clinging to the lower rungs of the economic ladder, it also fundamentally challenges the privileges of recipients' White racial identity. . . .

And third, labels such as “trailer” and “trailer trash” undermine one's personal integrity: they are

viewed as a broad attack on one's self worth and moral decency. . . . [D]ecency is a central principle guiding the lives of virtually all members of non-middle-class groups—even though the details of how this value is practiced in daily life are fiercely contested. Regardless of content, members of low-status groups often claim to have a clear sense of what “indecent” looks like among their peers. It seems that physical and symbolic proximity to others who are perceived as “indecent” increase attempts at differentiation (Lamont and Molnár 2002), thereby aiding the construction and maintenance of boundaries within marginalized groups. . . .

### Research and Data

Research was conducted between summer 2005 and spring 2008 in four adjacent Florida counties in a total of 21 communities. . . . Nearly 340,000 mobile home residents—almost 2% of the nation's total—are estimated to permanently live in this four-county area. Having been a major destination for trailer travel in the 1920s and 1930s, this region is considered to be the birthplace of mobile home communities in the United States.

Eighteen of the selected sites are mobile home parks, and three are mobile home neighborhoods in which houses are placed on individually owned parcels of land. Of the mobile home parks, one is a so-called migrant worker “camp” in which homes are rented by migrant farm workers. Eight parks are age-restricted senior communities (55 years and over), and nine are so-called family parks where no such restrictions exist. One of the senior parks is a resident-owned facility, meaning each resident owns a share of the park cooperative. With the exception of the resident-owned park and the migrant worker camp, all selected parks are of the land lease variety where residents are required to own their home yet pay rent to a park owner for the land on which it is placed. Virtually all research sites, whether urban, suburban or rural, were physically separated from other types of housing by streets, fences and/or natural features. Not unlike



traditional subdivisions, most mobile home parks provide one or two access points from the outside and a maze of internal roads; many are gated and shielded from view.

In 2007, monthly lot rents of mobile home owners ranged from the mid \$100s to the high \$400s, depending on a park's location, size, and amenities. The estimated value of our informants' homes ranged from \$2,000 for a deteriorating single-wide model from the 1960s to nearly \$100,000 for a new double-wide unit with vaulted ceilings. . . .

Ten undergraduate research assistants and I conducted interviews with members of 45 households, between one and ten at each research site. Four couples were interviewed together, resulting in a total of 49 study participants. . . .

### Mobile Home Residents' Strategies of Managing Stigma

Mobile home residents have developed a number of proactive and reactive strategies to cope with the negative views of their lifestyle expressed in public opinion and, occasionally, personal encounters. . . . The most common technique mentioned and displayed by residents was distancing, meaning instances of separating oneself and one's community from others who better fit the existing stereotypes. . . .

#### Distancing

We observed that the majority of informants distanced themselves and their associates from other mobile home residents and communities whom they considered fundamentally less worthy. This skillful strategy reflects Goffman's (1963, pp. 107–108) insight that members of stigmatized groups have adopted and internalized "the norms of wider society."

Whether closely allied with his own kind or not, the stigmatized individual may exhibit identity ambivalence when he obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way,

flamboyantly or pitifully acting out the negative attributes imputed to them. The sight may repel him, since after all he supports the norms of the wider society, but his social and psychological identification with these offenders holds him to what repels him, transforming repulsion into shame, and then transforming ashamedness itself into something of which he is ashamed.

Goffman here suggests that members of disparaged groups experience "identity ambivalence." They can be repulsed and even shamed by appearances and behaviors of their peers which lowers their self esteem and further increases their distance from dominant groups. Interestingly, signs of self-disparaging identity ambivalence were practically absent among mobile home residents interviewed for this study. It appeared that such feelings were preempted through cognitive and practical operations of distancing or, as it is sometimes called, othering.

Schwalbe et al. (2000) speak of "defensive othering among subordinates" in describing the efforts of disparaged individuals to deflect the stigma they are subjected to by others. . . . Schwalbe et al. (2000, p. 425) state that

[t]he process, in each case, involves accepting the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then saying, in effect, "There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me."

This seems to be the exact thought process behind the many instances of distancing or othering among mobile home residents who carefully erect symbolic boundaries between themselves and certain others whom they stigmatize in turn. To foreshadow one major result of the research, while a few informants were okay with calling their own home a "trailer" and their community a "trailer park," none of the interviewees embraced the term "trailer trash" as a positive identity; it was only used as a negative marker. All these terms, however, were applied by participants in reference to



other mobile home dwellers, including other interviewees who fit the given descriptions. The strategy of passing the stigma down the social pecking order to even more subordinate people serves to redraw the symbolic boundary between “good” and “bad.” It elevates the moral decency of one’s self and social group vis-à-vis others who, to outsiders, might look similar yet are fundamentally less worthy.

Upon close inspection, our data suggested a difference between two forms of distancing which could be described as “bordering” and “fencing.” “Bordering” shall refer to accounts and actions aimed at erecting boundaries between one’s own community and geographically, culturally, and/or structurally distant others. This type of disassociation is relatively easy for residents of parks that have positive characteristics such as upscale-sounding names, age restrictions, or preferred locations. In contrast, I shall call “fencing” those accounts and actions that emphasize differences within someone’s community. This version of othering requires a more nuanced thought process and was often observed among residents of mobile home parks that lack valued status characteristics. Both strategies were rooted in social differences between groups as well as in purely symbolic differences.

### Bordering

This strategy deflects the stigma of trailer living to other types of people and communities that are located somewhere else; for instance, on the proverbial other side of the tracks. Mobile home residents construct a difference between communities that conform to the label and views of a “trailer park” and their own communities which do not fall into this category and thus do not deserve the name and its associations.

Hank, a divorced White man in his late 60s, is a retired coal miner who lives in a rural senior park. His newer double-wide home looked inviting and clean, and family photographs decorated many of the walls. He explains the difference between his

community and a “stereotypical” mobile home park in the following way:

A lot of people stereotype mobile home people. They create creatures, trailer trash, things like that. And when I tell people that I live in a mobile home park, I try to stress it’s not a stereotypical mobile home park, it’s more like a resort, an adult community. (...) It’s more than a community, it’s like a big family. (...) For the most part, I’ve met some real fine people in here and it’s not people all from your same place. You got so much diversity of people; some bankers that get along with coal miners—it don’t seem to make any difference. We’re all in the same boat, so to speak.

Hank first sets up a contrast between his own “resort,” “adult” type of community and a “stereotypical mobile home park” that may be associated with the “trailer trash” creatures people often have in mind. In a second step, Hank then downplays class and cultural differences within his own park to stress the sense of equality and shared identity that is prevalent here. He even calls it a “big family” and conjures up the image of the same boat.

The careful attention Hank pays to labels and names was shared by many other informants. A number of seniors told us that they would never move into a community that calls itself a “trailer park.” Instead, they sought out, and now take pride in inhabiting, communities that carry more prestigious sounding names, such as “Meadowbrook Village,” “Winward Lakes,” “Shady Acres Estates,” or “Country Aire” (these are real names of mobile home communities in the larger area that resemble the names of communities inhabited by some senior research participants). Generally speaking, MHP—standing for “Mobile Home Park,” is a common ingredient of community names and viewed as acceptable by a majority of participants, even though many prefer community names that do not reference anything less than regular homes.

Aside from names, another major difference between a mobile home park and a “trailer park,” in the eyes of many informants, lies in the existence



of rules and regulations. Consider the following excerpt from the interview with Bella, a widowed White woman in her late 60s, who lives by herself in a well maintained suburban family park that used to be a senior community. Management has recently converted a tennis court to a fenced skate park, a rare amenity that is greatly appreciated by parents and youth.

BELLA: You know the only thing that I hate? You people have both used the word "community," "mobile home community." When people come in and refer to it as a "trailer park"! This is not a trailer park! I know what they mean by "trailer park," but other people cannot make the distinction, okay? This has rules and regulations, this has restrictions, okay? You must keep your property looking so and so. In a trailer park, you know, they. . .

LISA [interviewer]: Yeah, do whatever. . .

BELLA: Yeah, do whatever you want. Junk cars—and that's another thing, you know, your tags have to all be current, otherwise she tickets them and it's an eviction if you don't follow through on the rules and regs.

Given its tight rules and regulations, Bella considers "trailer park" to be an incorrect description of her community. While she vehemently opposes the label with respect to her own park, Bella implies that the term can be applied correctly to other places where residents are less regulated. The view that strict park rules regarding appearance coincide with a higher quality of residents who defy the common stereotypes was very common. Ironically, it was even held by people who despise their park's rules as unfair and ridiculous in other contexts.

Another example of this view was given by Lee, a White man in his mid-60s who recently retired from a middle management position and currently lives in an upscale suburban senior park with his wife. Being the park's representative of the mobile home owner's association, Lee uses the politically

correct term "manufactured homes" even when speaking of less desirable places.

There's manufactured homes and parks I wouldn't want to live in! They're trashy, they look junky. You might have a nice place and keep it up but your neighbors have got . . . they're working on an old junk car outside. They've got, you know . . . they aren't . . . we can't do that! We've got an RV park [a fenced section in one corner of the park] and if somebody has an RV or a 5th wheeler, that's where it's got to go. You can park on the street for a limited time, maybe about a half a day, 3, 4, 5 hours, but not overnight.

Lee here pictures "trashy" parks in which residents might work on "old junk cars," a widely used image symbolizing indecency that is borrowed from public stereotypes. In contrast, his community does not even allow residents to park vehicles on the street for more than a few hours. Lee would not make the mistake of moving into one of these "trashy" parks, even though he admits that they might include nice homes as well.

Thus far, according to many participants, park names and rules are important indicators of two very different kinds of mobile home communities and people: clean and respectable ones versus trashy and morally suspect others. . .

The following example again illustrates geographical distancing yet also introduces a new feature separating "good" and "bad" parks. Rick is a currently unemployed construction worker, a White man in his 40s who lives with his second wife and their young daughter in an urban family park located in an economically depressed part of town. The family does not have a telephone and their older single-wide home is in dire need of repair.

Unlike many others, Rick does not object to calling his community a "trailer park" yet he maintains that there are still important differences.

I've seen a lot, over there in Zephyrhills, there's a lot of trailer parks in a lot worse shape than what this trailer park is, and a lot older trailers than



what this park is! And this park is basically a more family atmosphere park than most of them around, I imagine.

Rick suggests that the "family atmosphere" of his park separates it from other, less desirable communities. He also draws on the more refined appearance and the lower age of homes in his park to support his, noticeably careful, claim. . . .

Consider a last example. Frankie, a single Hispanic man in his 50s, is a former construction worker who is now disabled. He lives with his mother, who is in very poor health, and a dog in an old single-wide unit in the same family community as Rick. Frankie owns an older model pickup truck and sometimes helps out neighbors who do not have transportation.

AUTHOR: So, you figure you'd like to remain in the park! You think it was a good place to go?

FRANKIE: Yeah, it's okay. It's a nice place. I've seen trailer parks, oh, they're nasty!

AUTHOR: Where?

FRANKIE: It's around here. There's was one. . . .

Rosie took me one time to pick up a dog. And that trailer park was so bad, people were moving out. You'd see trailers halfway hanging around back. And I've been to other trailer parks, I mean, they're nasty! They don't have grass, everything is sand, you know, the road's all messed up and, I mean, it ain't worth living in those things! And they pay more rent than I do. They pay about 400 to 500 a month. And they don't own the trailer!

AUTHOR: So you think this is one of the nicer parks?

FRANKIE: Yeah, it's a really nice park.

Frankie's view of his park as "really nice" in contrast to some other parks that are "nasty" is interesting. He grounds his description of his own community on appearance rather than location, noting that bad looking parks can be found "around here." Frankie further emphasizes that residents of these other parks do not own their trailers, whereas he

does, thereby highlighting the difference between owner-occupied and renter-occupied parks.

To sum up this section, bordering, as a form of distancing, invokes critical boundaries between the following categories: places that are called "trailer parks" versus more prestigious sounding names (with "mobile home park" being an acceptable neutral term), senior versus family parks, parks that have strict rules and regulations versus those that do not, parks that charge high rents versus those that charge low rents, differences between certain neighborhoods and towns, family-oriented parks versus others that are not, owner-occupied versus renter-occupied parks, and simply nice-looking versus nasty-looking parks. The general implication is that one's own park, and, by extension, one's self, are more respectable than other, distant communities and people. Interestingly, the social and economic diversity that might exist in one's own park is viewed as something positive because, by definition, it does not cross the decency divide.

### Fencing

In his autobiographical essay, Berube (1997) highlights the importance of social differentiation within the mobile home parks he grew up in. His family's sense of respectability was built on its perceived difference from less decent neighbors. . . . I found a very comparable process in our data which I here call "fencing." Fencing is more subtle and complex than bordering because it requires the construction of internal differences within a given location or community. Residents cannot simply rely on broad social or geographic differences; they need to construct more nuanced, localized boundaries to justify their own placement on the good side of the decency divide.

At the time of our interview Liz, a White former nurse in her 60s who now works part-time at a convenience store, was the district president of the mobile home owners association. She shared a single-wide waterfront home with her third husband and a small dog, living right next door to her adult



son, a sufferer from bipolar disorder. In the following excerpt, Liz claims that certain people in her urban family park are far from perfect.

LIZ: There's just so many things that are not right about the park! But it is a wonderful place to live, if we ever get it cleaned up and get the riff-raff out. And that's what the present administration is trying to do. They're really trying to get rid of the people that are drug addicts. I won't say "alcoholics" because we got a lot of alcoholics and that's all over the world. You know, so I won't say that they're targeting them. But they're certainly targeting drug dealers.

AUTHOR: Well, that makes sense.

LIZ: Oh yeah. We used to be an all White park. And now we have Blacks, we have Hispanics, Latinos, whatever. . . .

AUTHOR: Does it cause conflict when there is turnover of who is living in the park?

LIZ: They're having some problems. We have the police in here quite frequently.

AUTHOR: Is there drugs?

LIZ: Drugs and domestic violence and kids stealing.

Liz here associates the ongoing decline of her community with the presence of "riff-raff." She includes drug addicts and drug dealers in the category of "bad" people yet she excludes alcoholics because she considers alcoholism to be a more universal and benign problem. Liz thus draws a clear distinction between two types of problems: one forgivable and not reflective of a person's character, and the other unforgivable and indicative of a person's compromised moral values, echoing popular constructions of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor (Katz 1989). Later, she adds "domestic violence" and deviant children to the latter kinds of problems currently rampant in her park. Liz also seems to suggest that non-White people are responsible for most of the serious problems. Her use of the pronouns "we" and "they" aids her construction of two basic categories of people. There is no doubt that Liz, as an old-time resident who did

not witness any major issues in the past, considers herself to be a member of the respectable group.

Another interesting example of fencing is seen in the following passage from my interview with Ruby, a White woman in her mid-30s who works part-time as a gas station attendant and lives in a suburban family park. Ruby shares a large double-wide home with her husband and her mother (who was severely intoxicated when she returned to the house from a shopping trip during the interview), as well as 22 indoor/outdoor cats.

When Home Town [the park's new management company] took over, there were a couple of things that needed to be done. And one of them that they did do was they got a lot of the drug dealers out. Which was a good thing. The other thing is that they got a lot of the old and rundown trailers out of here! And I say "trailers" because that's what they were! You won't ever hear anybody who lives in a mobile home park refer to their home as a "trailer." I mean, that's just one thing we don't do. As far as anything else that they've done, we had a Homeowner's Association, and they had a part in abolishing it.

Ruby here calls some of the former homes in her park "trailers." She applies this term to homes that "needed" to disappear, just like the "drug dealers." However, in the very next sentence she denies that "anybody" living in a mobile home would ever call his or her home a "trailer." She then qualifies that this is something "we" would never do. Clearly, Ruby does not consider drug dealers and trailer residents to be part of her community. She draws a symbolic boundary between people like herself, who should remain in the park, and drug dealers and trailer residents on the other side who are not part of the community and thus deserve to be removed. In the excerpt, Ruby credits the new management company for this achievement, even though she despises it otherwise because they have "abolished" the Homeowner's Association she and her mother were actively involved in, and because they recently impounded her broken-down car





that had been sitting in the driveway for quite some time, as she tells me later. Based on her “junk car,” her mother’s alcoholism, the many cats, as well as some other characteristics, Ruby and her family fit some of the “trailer trash” stereotypes invoked by other informants. Yet Ruby vehemently claims her family’s decency and community membership by differentiating herself from other residents who live in less attractive homes and are involved in illegal activities.

Distancing is especially difficult for people who have children because they fall into the category of people who potentially have, and cause, serious problems. The next excerpt from the interview with Rick, who was introduced above, illustrates this. . . . Rick and his wife live together with their young daughter in an urban family park, and . . . both are currently unemployed.

You gotta watch your kids here, because you got a lot a young people with the boom boxes and running faster than what they should be through here. I’ve called on a couple of them myself, and the old man over here next door has too. Basically, anywhere you go in this country you’re gonna run into kids like that, you know. I haven’t forgotten that I was a teenager one time myself, but you’ve got. . . . The younger generation has got to have a little bit of respect for the children out here playing! That’s the biggest thing. It’s not a bad place it’s just. . . . you got a few people, especially the young breed. . . . the old breed, they don’t mess with nobody, they pretty well keep to themselves, but the younger people. . . . boy, I’ve heard them come in here [at] late hours of the night before. I don’t know, most the time I’ve seen guys like that run during late-at-night time, they’re either in here messing with stuff or dealing drugs. And which you’re gonna have that, no matter where you are, those kind of things. But, you know, as far as a family neighborhood, it’s not off too bad. ( . . . ) Some of the older Hispanics here, you can tell that they well maintain their property. And the younger breed, a lot of them, they’ll put up junk cars! I mean, you can tell a difference. A lot of

people judges a whole neighborhood by what they see when they walk [around]. It’s just like judging a book by its cover, and that’s basically what happened here. Everybody says, you know, well, that’s a trailer park, and they assume the worst about a lot of trailer parks.

Rick isolates the problems in his park as a matter of out-of-control teenagers which he views as something the entire country has to deal with, not only his park. It is the “young breed” you cannot trust, whereas the “old breed” and the families with smaller children, such as his own, are okay. Rick also invokes the wisdom that looks can be deceiving. It would be wrong to “assume the worst” about everyone living in his park just because a few teens run wild. Even though the conduct and dealings of the few indecent people are very visible, Rick insists that he can “tell a difference” because of his greater experience.

Telling the difference between “decent” and “bad” people thus involves local knowledge, a skill that resembles the type of “street wisdom” Anderson (1999) found to be at work in inner cities. Rick also invokes another, historic difference, the one between his own and the current teenage generation that appears to have “less respect” for children. Lastly, Rick emphasized that the “older Hispanics” are part of the respectable people, meaning he does not view the decency divide as a racial boundary. To sum up Rick’s view, decency is primarily a matter of age.

The following last example of fencing also deals with deceptive appearances, yet in a different manner. Heather is an unemployed White woman in her mid-30s who lives with her four children and one grandchild, as well as several dogs, in an older single-wide home in a small rural family park.

HEATHER: And when I saw it, you know, it looked nice. And it looked clean, so I thought it wouldn’t be like living in a trailer park, you know, I thought it’d be a better place. It’s not! It’s just like any other trailer park. . . .

AUTHOR: Like a mobile park. . . .

HEATHER: It’s full of trailer trash!





Heather originally relied on the “nice” and “clean” look of the community to make sure that she and her family ended up living in a good place. However, she learned that the initially decent appearance of the park was misleading. It turned out to be “just like any other trailer park,” meaning it is occupied by people with questionable moral values (she later cites drug dealing as an example). Heather refuses my awkward offer to soften her term “trailer park” and even goes one step further by calling other residents “trailer trash.”

Interestingly, Heather’s classification of her neighbors as “trailer trash” appears to be rooted in their behavior as opposed to the appearance of their homes—a view that is consistent with her personal situation. Heather’s place was, by far, the most untidy looking home in her park: two damaged cars, one completely disabled, were sitting in her driveway, and the overgrown lawn area around her house was littered with children’s toys, broken bicycles, and indoor furniture. I also noticed that none of Heather’s school-age children attended school on the morning of our interview, and that her teenage son was playing music very loudly. Given these and a number of other circumstances, there is no doubt that the majority of our participants would consider Heather’s home and personal situation to be a fitting example of the “trailer” lifestyle they are trying to disassociate from. Heather, however, refuses this view and, in turn, distances herself from her neighbors who managed to deceive her by falsely appearing decent. As could be expected, Heather, whom I met through her oldest daughter, was not willing to refer me to other residents of her community—in fact, she frequently spoke of her wish of moving out.

Generally speaking, distancing was thus aimed at nearby others who might be of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, who might be more recent arrivals, people perceived to be “drug addicts,” “drug dealers” and thieves, teenagers, people with family problems, and generally people living in dilapidated “trailers.” Many residents did not

consider these others to be part of the local community and insisted that they be removed. Conversely, a few informants considered themselves to be different from the majority of people in their park and isolated themselves as a result (see also Edwards 2004).

### Conclusion

Our study revealed a range of techniques participants use in response to media or personal denigrations of their homes and communities. Their strategies serve to downplay, dissolve, deny, and deflect the negative image of living in a “trailer.” My analysis newly differentiates between two subforms of the widely used technique of distancing which is a strategy meant to deflect stigma, here called “bordering” and “fencing.” The above discussion illuminates structural and situational variations in the use of distancing which might be useful to consider in future research on stigma.

Interestingly, one otherwise common strategy of stigma management is conspicuously rare in our data. Historically, members of many stigmatized groups have managed to deconstruct disparaging views and terms by embracing them in their fight for equality. It could be argued that such cognitive and semantic shifts helped to deflate attacks on the respectability of historically oppressed groups. There is no doubt that most people we encountered in our research are proud of their homes and communities. Some explicitly pointed out the advantages of their lifestyle, and a few even tolerated the terms “trailer” and “trailer park” in reference to their living situation. While these findings indicate some degree of embracing the mobile home lifestyle and its negative views, nobody in our sample accepted the terms “trailer trash” or “White trash” in reference to themselves. These epithets were only used in negative, distancing statements even though examples of adopting the “trash” label can occasionally be found in public discourse.



Second, the struggle for acceptance into the moral mainstream displayed by mobile home residents is another sign that the desire to be “decent” transcends the middle class and is, arguably, universal in our society. . . . It is actually more than a desire: decency was portrayed as a character trait that is already possessed by people like oneself yet lacking in certain others. . . .

And third, the above analysis contributes to our knowledge of social and symbolic differentiation within the bottom half of American society. . . . The personal experience of stigmatization does not automatically result in deeper, empathetic insight into the mechanics of victimization, and it certainly does not lead to a rejection of stigmatization per se. Ironically, most mobile home residents seem to draw on the same stereotypes in their own construction of boundaries which they despised when they were applied to themselves. Our research further indicates that the “trailer” stigma is of particular concern to heterosexual Whites who largely embrace traditional family values, thus presenting an interesting form of social exclusion within a category of people that considers itself to be dominant in other contexts. There are clear racial subtexts to White-on-White struggles over decency. . . .

Finally, my analysis indicates that the trailer stigma is most frequently applied to people who lack material resources and/or possess compromising conditions prohibiting them from moving into “better” communities elsewhere, thus obtaining the privilege of decency via geography. It appears that the greater one’s own chance of victimization, the more vehemently the stigma is passed to people down below which, in some cases, means next door. The fight over decency seems toughest at the bottom of the economic ladder. Under such high pressure, bets on the unity of one’s neighborhood community are called off quickly, giving rise to constructions of “outsiders within.” It is not entirely surprising that poverty and a lack of respect nurture tensions within local community contexts.

Future research on mobile home residents and other morally disparaged groups, especially those with ambivalent status characteristics, will hopefully facilitate deeper insights into the aggregated social-level—in addition to individual-level—costs of stigmatization, and into self-perpetuating cycles of moral abuse.

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## Reflective Questions

1. What is stigma? How is stigma related to social inequalities? Why is trailer living so stigmatizing?
2. What is distancing, and how does it work? How does bordering serve as a distancing strategy? In the residents’ eyes, how are mobile communities different from a trailer park? What distinguishes





"respectable" mobile home residents from "indecent" ones?

3. How is fencing different from bordering? How does fencing relieve stigma?
4. Mobile home residents are not the only stigmatized people who establish their decency by distancing themselves from others. Why do they do this rather than approaching others with empathy? Who else does this? How?
5. If people with few material resources use distancing to establish their respectability, how do you make

sense of redneck and blue-collar humor? Go to YouTube and watch a few sessions of Bill Engvall, Larry the Cable Guy, Ron White, and Jeff Foxworthy. What aspects of redneck life do the comedians praise? What do they poke fun at? Do they engage in distancing? Why or why not? Does redneck humor have negative consequences for those who fit redneck stereotypes? Several redneck comedians have become famous and established lucrative careers. Does their personal situation change the meaning of their redneck humor? Why or why not?





## Professional Emotional Labor as a Racial Project

CARISSA FROYUM

*For many Americans, "racism" conjures two mental images: eras gone by in which whites ruled blacks through brutal systems of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, or personal animus for people of a different color. Racism, many suggest, used to be expressed openly through nasty language and violence but is no longer socially acceptable. Inequality scholars certainly agree that discriminatory social policies and individuals' hatred have been foundational to racism, the hierarchical system that elevates whiteness and secures a variety of resources, from mortgages to votes, for whites. They argue that they still are. But sociologists are interested also in the subtle ways everyday interactions produce racial stratification, particularly when actors do not express dislike for others who look different from them.*

*In Froyum's study of a youth agency, we encounter well-intentioned whites who have dedicated their careers and volunteerism to helping low-income black youth better their lives. They care deeply for the kids at Kidworks. They desperately want them to be successful in life and especially to go to college. They could easily invest their time, money, and talents in other causes. At the same time, Kidworks is characterized by dramatic racial hierarchy. An elite group of whites control policymaking and cultivate a consciously crafted image of Kidworks to the public, one that depends on othering blacks. They use Kidworks to foster*

*social networks exclusive to other upper-middle-class and upper-class whites. They promote whites into highly paid administrative positions. The questions then become: How does this happen? How do we have both good intentions and racial stratification?*

*Sociologists define power as the ability to get others to do what one wants, even when it is not in their best interest to do so. Racism is a system of stratified power. Historically, whites have exercised power in two general ways. First, they have dominated through force and coercion. They created police units to capture runaway slaves. They passed laws that excluded everyone but whites, who were defined differently depending on the place and time, from owning property. Exerting power through the instruments of law and violence continue today: through the mass incarceration of men of color, for example. Second, whites rule by gaining the consent of whites and non-whites alike. That is, whites essentially convince others that they are better and deserve more or that being subordinate is in everyone's best interest. Rule by consent is insidious and difficult to challenge because it camouflages inequality and disguises its wrongfulness.*

*Kidworks shows us how this second process works on the ground level, and the role that emotions play in ruling by consent. At Kidworks, whites expected what other people in superordinate positions expect: emotional experiences that make them feel good and*

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superior. White administrators required unreciprocated emotional deference from blacks. They demanded what they wanted from black workers, when they wanted it, and however they wanted with little or no regard for the workers' feelings. White volunteers remained committed to Kidworks as long as their experiences paid off emotionally and they felt essential to a triumphant success storyline. Both emotional relationships existed along racial lines: with whites getting emotional benefits through blacks' subordination. Moreover, whites often characterized black kids and families in racist ways—as culturally dysfunctional or as entertainment—to position themselves to receive emotional benefits.

Why didn't black workers protest or quit? And why would they help cultivate success stories by recruiting and training kids to give public testimonials that framed blacks as destitute? As Froyum shows, black workers were often uncomfortable with the racial dynamics at Kidworks, and they did protest at times. But mostly they consented to these racial dynamics because they believed in Kidworks' cause and the professionalism standard that whites used to enforce blacks' emotional deference. Professionalism dictated that they put the kids' needs before their own and suppress negative emotions to do so. Everything else became a means to the end of saving kids. When workers did challenge racism, they risked failing the kids and being unprofessional. Whites and even other blacks quickly reprioritized for them. In essence, black emotional deference under the guise of professionalism became a tool of white racial rule by consent.

The larger sociological psychological lessons are clear. Emotions—what we expect from others, how we manage them—are tools for securing power. They are also central to blinding us to power imbalances that exist. Finally, we need not be hateful or intend bad things in order for our actions to create them. If we take the latter seriously, this piece calls us to look closely at the consequences of our own emotional expectations.

Work often includes emotional labor, or conjuring emotional states in others and managing one's own emotions for pay (Hochschild 1983, p. 7). Research has demonstrated how stratification

systems shape emotional labor and criticized the consequences for workers. Workers with high status enjoy a range of emotional expressions and control "feeling rules," the scripts to evoke particular emotional states (Hochschild 1983; Pierce 1995; Sloan 2004). They more often expect emotional deference than give it, producing positive emotional experiences. Organizations prescribe deferential feeling rules for lower-status workers, alternatively, creating negative or conflicted emotions (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1999). Managers suppress criticism of inequality by conditioning workers' emotional subjectivities (Kunda and Maanen 1999; Schwalbe et al. 2000; Jocoy 2003). Despite their connecting emotions to inequalities, studies have rarely examined emotional labor processes in relation to race, leaving a misimpression of race neutrality or inconsequentiality.

... This study examines an emotion-based racial project in a workplace where whites prescribed deferential emotional labor but black youth workers internalized it. It uses Schwalbe et al.'s (2000) concept of regulating discourse to analyze how administrators used professionalism to define and police deferential emotion work in ways that reinforced racial structuring. It asks: Why did black workers engage in deferential emotional work? How did workers resolve conflicts stemming from racializing feeling rules? How did emotional labor stabilize racial organizing? In answering these questions, this study illustrates how emotional labor elicited the participation of black workers in their own racial subordination.

### Kidworks

Kidworks (KW) was a non-profit youth agency with a mission of cultural change: to help disadvantaged children become productive adults. It provided life-skills and recreational programs at six locations in a mid-sized US city with moderate levels of racial residential segregation. My analysis focuses on two sites in a neighborhood disproportionately black and poor. ... These sites served mostly low- and middle-income black girls and



boys, ages six to twelve, in gender-segregated facilities I call Girlworks and Boyworks.

KW's workplace was racially stratified. The direct-care workers who carried out the mission of the organization primarily identified as black. Between both sites, the direct-care workforce consisted of a couple dozen black workers. Two or three usually black full-time salaried "professionals," most with college degrees, worked at either site at any time. They earned between \$28,500 and \$47,000 yearly and had little chance for promotion. Boyworks employed men and women, while Girlworks only employed women. A dozen part-time college students worked at both sites; black and some white women worked with girls, while women and men worked with boys. Most made about seven dollars an hour. A young black woman was the volunteer coordinator. She also handled "accountability" to benefactors and hosted fundraisers; she earned \$32,000 yearly.

Yet, those with high status and policy-making authority were nearly universally upper-middle-class and upper-class whites. The director, a well-connected white man, earned \$103,000. The assistant director, a white man, earned \$75,000. White women served as resource developer, government relations officer, and personal assistant. Thirty-four whites (twenty-six men) and one black man constituted the board of directors. Its members were established white businessmen with social networks in real estate, finance, and banking. The board made policy, networked, and fundraised to secure KW's \$4.5 million annual revenues. In 2006, the top board fundraiser solicited over \$33,000. Younger white lawyers and financial officers created another group that planned and hosted fundraisers. At KW, then, whites nearly exclusively dictated policy and standards of behavior for black workers who carried out KW's mission.

### Data

I volunteered and conducted participant observation at KW between October 2004 and June 2006. Around 300 hours at life-skills groups, art

classes, volunteer events, fundraising events and interviews produced 2,000 pages of field notes and transcripts. . . .

I also conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with forty workers, administrators, volunteers, fundraisers, board members, and kids. The relevant interviewees included ten self-identified white volunteers and administrators, fifteen self-identified black workers or volunteers, and one self-identified Latino worker. Interviews focused on work and volunteer experiences, relationships between kids and adults, and actors' interpretations. . . .

### Findings

#### Emotional Experiences to Overcome Cultural Dysfunction

Kidworks created an informal code of conduct around professionalism. Professionalism attests to workers' skill and expertise (Harris 2002), and workers feel compelled to act professionally in order to demonstrate competence (Erickson 2004; Lewis 2005). At KW, administrators appropriated professionalism as a regulating discourse (Schwalbe et al. 2000) that promoted deferential forms of emotional labor which conjured feelings of "belonging" among children, emotional release among white volunteers, and devotion among black workers. KW administrators, board members, and official documents labeled full-time workers "trained, professional staff." The label was so ubiquitous and valued that professionalism standards applied to both full-time and part-time direct-care workers, who routinely called themselves "professionals," even though their positions did not rise to professional status. Workers learned professionalism at regional and local trainings, and through interactions with administrators.

Professionalism prescribed emotional labor among black workers in order to overcome what whites perceived as poor black kids' social disadvantage. White administrators and volunteers at Kidworks drew on long-standing racist stereotypes



about black cultural dysfunction (Collins 2004) when describing the challenges that KW children faced. A primary problem, from their perspective, was neighborhood and home instability: environments marred by drugs, violence, parental instability, and neglect. Wanda, a white fundraiser, characterized KW kids' backgrounds as "socially weaker" and "economically weaker." She explained further: "... there's shootings, the police cars ... even those things that those kids have to go through whether it's verbal abuse, maybe other kinds of changes, being in foster homes or God knows what." Whites believed these circumstances undercut kids' life chances by divesting them from achieving. Kidworks' challenge, in turn, was to help children overcome the cultural dysfunction around them. A white board member explained: she wanted kids to "know that the world is larger than what they experience every day, and they don't have to let their family circumstances hold them back."

#### Creating an Emotional Refuge

Whites thought kids needed to connect with adults in order to motivate them to change their lives. KW materials explained that the agency provided "a safe place to learn and grow," "ongoing relationships with caring, adult professionals," and "life-enhancing programs and character development experiences." Administrators tasked direct-care workers, largely black, with creating an emotional refuge through professionalism. Wanda espoused this perspective when she juxtaposed the security that KW "professionals" created to the "majority" of homes of the children, which "probably don't have that": KW provided "a safe place," where children "get a relationship with a KW professional [knowing] that when they go there [to Kidworks], [they're] being heard, they have a sense of belonging. ..." According to KW discourse, feelings of comfort and connectedness made personal development possible by fostering emotional stakes among children. Then kids felt obligated to act as adults, who presumably had their best interests at heart, directed. Belonging also offered a sense of purpose and meaning.

Edward, a white administrator, described emotional connection as an agent of change:

Nowadays to get [kids] to respond to you, they have to have ... that connection with you individually ... so that they don't want to disappoint you. ... [Otherwise] they don't have a stake in Kidworks. ... And so you try to build that feeling of "I'm part of something."

Administrators similarly touted emotional connection between children and workers as the foundation for long-term influence: "When kids come back years later, they always tell us that they forget the programming, but they remember the people" (Richard, white administrator, during a presentation to white donors).

Professionalism generally allows workers emotional autonomy and control over their feeling scripts, but at KW professionalism dictated deferential emotional labor that set the "right" priorities—the kids and KW's brand, as a place of change, over self. Tasha, a black worker, explained that KW's code of conduct was "about protecting the brand, protecting kids, and protecting yourself. So kids come first, brand comes second, you come last." The code established connecting emotionally with children as a primary requirement of direct-care work, one that further involved employees devoting themselves to their jobs and integrating their personal identities with their worker role. Relating this way involved transforming KW into a home-like atmosphere filled with familiarity, comfort, and emotional availability. In a report's description of KW's "highest priority," a board member explained: "We believe that Kidworks provides a 'home away from home' for many children, where young people receive the guidance and support to overcome the most daunting obstacles, and where children learn to live honorably." Workers created a "home" or "family" at work by integrating children into their emotional lives and making themselves readily available. Libby, a black worker, stated:

[Kids] can call me anytime they need to talk ... they're not always able to talk to their parents about



everything. "So you can call me if need be. Or give me your number and I'll call you." . . . sometimes on the weekend, I'll just go get [two specific girls] and they stay at my house all day and Miss Casey [another worker] comes over . . . we'll just sit there, laugh and talk. . . . I try to get them as much as I can, so they feel some type of love and some type of support in things they do because they don't get the attention they need at home.

By giving out their cell numbers and bringing girls home with them, Libby and Casey extended themselves emotionally so that girls' problems became their own. They positioned themselves as the girls' confidants, and they tried to fill their emotional needs by making them feel loved. Other workers acted like family by meeting with kids' teachers and intervening when their relationships or lives took a wrong turn. Ben, a black employee, "kept tabs" on Eric, whose mother was seriously ill. Ben worried that Eric "wouldn't know what to do" if his mother died because "nobody from his family would take [him and his brother] in. . . . Pretty much Eric is taking care of himself." Ben fretted about "his sad situation." Because Eric's family did not help him, Ben made a point to: "I will do anything for the guy, like I donate clothes and shoes to him. . . . I do things so they can stay positive so they won't have to go out here and do the wrong thing." Consistent with KW's dictate of professionalism, Ben took his work home with him.

Professionalism also encouraged workers to find fulfillment through emotionally investing in children. A mailing described KW professionals as "men and women who use their education, training and energies to help young people. They enjoy being with kids, they understand them and get satisfaction from seeing them become responsible citizens and leaders." Employees internalized this call; they routinely described loving the children. Libby, for instance, described the rewards of her job as worth the frustration she felt with some of the girls: "I get joy just being around them every day. . . . I love them all like if they were mine. I

really do. It's a few bad ones that get on my nerves. But you know what? I love them all." According to professionalism, love and making a difference were their own rewards.

But integrating work and family was one-sided: while professionalism prescribed emotional labor that integrated children into workers' lives, it proscribed letting employees' emotional lives intrude on their jobs. This was part of what Tasha meant by putting the needs of kids first. Here, professionalism discourse treated the workers' personal lives as potential pollutants to be contained and controlled. To prevent workers' own emotions from becoming overbearing or their own needs from interfering, workers were to separate the personal from the professional: "If you're having a bad day at home, you gotta leave that outside that door," Ben learned from his training. "Because once you come in here, you gotta go to work. . . . You gotta come in with a positive attitude." Maintaining a "positive attitude" entailed compartmentalizing in order to prioritize the children. Ben explained: "Working here at Kidworks and [having a] family, you have to keep those separated because here you have to have your full attention on the kids in this building." For Sharice, a black worker, professionalism encouraged workers to give kids their due attention rather than "bad attitude":

You can't come into Kidworks with your head held down acting like you know the weight of the world is on your shoulders. Like I tell [workers] every day, "We all go through personal stuff, but [kids] have not done anything to us. So when you come through those doors, whatever problems you have brought with you to work, you need to leave them beside those doors."

Not taking one's personal frustration out on the kids, furthermore, entailed suppressing negative emotions. Edward, a white administrator, looked to employees to temper these emotions, demonstrating what he called "temperament" and "aptitude," especially during "mad moments" when kids acted out or staff became frustrated. After Warner,



a black worker, lost his temper during a confrontation with a kid, a white administrator challenged him to control himself: "Warner, you just, you've got to learn to humble yourself. And when you learn to do that, [kids] will do the same thing."

#### Fostering Whites' Investment

Additionally, prioritizing the kids and brand meant fostering whites' commitment to KW through emotional labor. The professional code of conduct existed in part to maintain a funding stream to KW, which primarily depended on individuals, corporations, and foundations. This is what Tasha termed prioritizing KW's brand, as a nonprofit that truly influenced lives. Changes in resource allocation have led nonprofits to adopt capitalist business models where donors are clients and fundraisers are marketers (Dees and Battle Anderson 2003). Because of their dependence upon public patronage, nonprofits cultivate emotional experiences that invest donors in organizations. The most effective strategies (Merchant, Ford and Sargeant 2009) situate donating as a release from negative emotions and [a] source of positive ones. KW fit these patterns. Fundraising and volunteer recruitment were major enterprises at KW, which tapped into elite white real estate and finance networks to garner personal and financial support. Nearly all Kidworks' donors and the vast majority of volunteers, especially those who fundraised, were middle-class to upper-class whites. Emotional experiences made Kidworks their "charity of choice" (June, a white volunteer fundraiser, who worked in sales and marketing). Whites became attached to KW when they felt a "warm glow" (Andreoni 1990) by altering the life course of children—when they felt generous, important, and socially conscious.

In experiencing these emotions, however, whites othered the kids as needy, in turn framing themselves as redemptive. Like administrators, white donors and volunteers attributed poor and black kids' vulnerability to culturally dysfunctional backgrounds. Miranda, a white volunteer fundraiser who worked in finance, stated: "I can't

imagine what it's like for kids who not only don't have someone pushing them to achieve in life but . . . they don't even have the basics to learn how to be a good person." In contrast to black workers below, white donors and volunteers distinguished their "lucky," "privileged" childhoods full of love, encouragement, and opportunity from what they understood as the deprivation experienced by "underprivileged" kids. June juxtaposed her experiences to the kids' using a framework of cultural function versus dysfunction: ". . . I had such a happy family life. I can't understand how people grow up without a happy family life. . . . KW sorta piles all types of people from all types of different, challenging backgrounds into one pot." After I asked her what made her volunteer work meaningful, she stated:

The kids, the "thank-yous," the hugs, the "I love you," how much they need attention, how it tugs on your heart strings that they might not get the attention at home and how much Kidworks is a source for them to get the attention and the guidance and the affirmation, to me is tops. . . . it does your heart good and breaks your heart a little bit to be there at the same time.

For whites who "can't imagine" or "understand" what they perceived as neglectful backgrounds, KW elicited pity through othering, and giving made them feel important and influential.

Essential to these emotions was observing results personally but without losing control over the emotional experience. KW did not expect or require volunteers or donors to expose themselves emotionally by creating a home, becoming like family, or overlooking their own emotional needs. Rather, it employed its direct-care staff to create an emotional experience that cultivated emotional release for whites by facilitating seeing kids change, interacting with grateful children, and viewing programs and facilities in use and well cared for. These results made giving time and money feel worthwhile. As Miranda put it: "It really brings it home if I can feel what I'm working for." Professionalism at



KW, thus, also tasked creating an emotional experience for potential volunteers and funders so they could feel what they were working for.

One strategy was to charge professional employees with preparing triumphant stories (Merchant, Ford and Sargeant 2009) for public consumption at fundraising events and scholarship contests. These stories gave whites a feel of their influence by eliciting pity about kids' backgrounds and attesting to the potential for change with their resources. They followed this narrative: Marlesa came from a broken background that led her down the wrong path, KW gave her the support she needed, now she is headed the right way, you can help girls like her. Administrators invited workers to share their own stories, and they assigned them with finding and telling kids' stories. An annual report featuring Jeremiah, a black boy around ten, modeled for black workers how to, in the terms of a white fundraiser, "tell a success story" and personalize. The report described him as struggling in school and delinquent. Staff, it read, worked until closing for a year until Mark improved academically and behaviourally. "Proof again," it concluded, "that KW changes, enhances—even saves—the lives of young people." Employees became skilled in describing the work of KW as saving so that potential donors *felt* influential without actually knowing the kids. Ben grew up in the neighborhood and attended KW. Of his close friends, a handful graduated from high school:

Everybody else was just caught up in the streets. . . . I believe that Kidworks was a good, positive way for me to learn the right things and . . . to teach you how to be a responsible young man. Kidworks was really influential in my life.

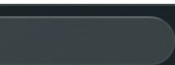
More impressive, however, were children testifying themselves. Workers recruited kids to testify and coached them how under the rubric of practicing public speaking or getting recognition or scholarship money. Samuel, a white volunteer fundraiser, learned the story of Marcesha at a KW event. He juxtaposed her success to the troubles

of her brother due to her involvement in KW: "He really wasn't as active as she was and didn't really participate in everything like she did. And she felt like if it wasn't for KW, she'd be down that same road." For a scholarship contest, employees nominated kids and helped them prepare extensive applications which testified about their background, KW involvement, and influence of KW. They coached kids how to dress and present themselves, and they drove kids to the contest where a group of 26 mostly upper-middle class whites acted as judges who questioned the kids about their deservedness through several rounds of interviews. Among the criteria KW supplied to judges were "obstacles overcome," which elicited the triumphant storylines that contestants then relayed at fundraising events. June, who served as a judge, described learning about a boy whose:

mom was single, pregnant, been through four husbands. . . . Certainly there was nobody waiting for him at home. But if he didn't have anywhere else to go, then he probably would have ended up a little bit misguided. And he'll probably look back one day and know how much Kidworks has done for him.

One scholarship winner, Carl, a teenage black boy, especially made lasting impressions on white volunteers. He told the judges: "When I was seven, I was adopted. I think my biggest obstacle in life was trying to put my past behind me. I witnessed a lot of alcohol and drugs, physical abuse. And I feel like I never want to be that way." Miranda was so moved by this testimonial that she recalled it a year later: "I think he has every opportunity to come from that unhealthy lower-class-struggling-to-get-by-type-of-existence into the American dream." Carl's story was known throughout the organization because, as Warner, a black employee, explained, workers enlisted him "to speak at just about every big event we have." Staffers had invested considerable resources into his success by securing tutors, jobs, and scholarships for college. As Warner stated: "We're really working on him and putting a lot of time in him."







Darin invited another "respectful" boy, Martin, with "positive attitude" to represent KW "every time we have a speaking engagement." One event was a major fundraiser featuring a jewelry auction at an upscale department store. Workers prepared several kids by renting tuxedos and coaching them to greet whites by opening the door, hanging their jackets, and ushering them onto a red carpet. While other kids represented KW's importance in speeches, Martin, dressed in his tuxedo, mingled with white donors who gathered around him, saying: "You're so handsome! Look at you. What a cutie!" For much of the night, he danced for his admirers, evoking Jim Crow era caricatures of blacks as entertaining exotic others. These strategies had their desired emotional effect, as Miranda shows:

To see the kids and know these are some of the kids that we are helping by being here and having a good time, bidding up the auction to support, I think it makes a big impact. . . . I see the kids at the door and I hear the little boy talk about what Kidworks means to him and all of a sudden I'm thinking I need to buy more.

Finally, administrators charged black workers with creating a personal experience for whites who came to visit or volunteer. Administrators instructed them to use the term "we" rather than "I" whenever discussing KW so that they felt vital to KW's functioning. A white administrator mentored a black worker to make volunteers feel special by learning their names and showering praise and thanks at elaborate "volunteer celebrations." She routinely sent cards with personalized messages. When potential donors entered the buildings, administrators had workers immediately accommodate them: greet them with a smile, invite them in, provide tours, and describe the programs that made KW successful.

In sum, professionalism at KW prescribed differential emotional labor for blacks working directly with kids and white donors and volunteers. Based on the racist assumptions that black kids

were culturally dysfunctional, white administrators employed a professionalism discourse that framed workers as family members who loved the children and devoted themselves to them. Not letting their personal lives impede on the work added additional layers of deferential emotion work. Administrators, furthermore, required black workers to facilitate cross-race interactions, which left whites feeling a warm glow. These personalization strategies were unidirectional and unreciprocated (Lewis 2005) across race lines. They reinforced stereotypes of blacks as exotic others.

### Effects of Professionalism on Workers

Black workers often internalized KW's standards of professionalism. Workers adopted the discourses administrators professed in public, routinely word-for-word as Darin did. He adopted the "remember the people" language from above: "That's where the impact comes in. That's what we hope when the kids leave here," he explained. "They won't remember every tournament they were in, but they will remember Ben or Warner . . . and the positive impact they had on their lives." Professional emotional labor made the work feel important.

Loving the children and creating a home, then, were no longer what administrators wanted from workers; they were what workers wanted for themselves. Workers' devotion to children aligned their interests with the organization's. Through professional emotional labor, workers identified closely with children. Compare the workers' descriptions of "giving back" to the othering accounts of white volunteers above. Workers wanted children to experience the same benefits they experienced at KW. Darin stated:

I grew up here in southwest Sherburne where the kids are served. So the same streets and community and houses that they live in, I lived in. . . . [Working here] was an opportunity to give back to kids like I was given back to.

Others wanted to make life easier than they had it. Yolanda, a black volunteer, struggled after her



mother died: "I try to help children to get what I didn't get." No whites related to kids this way.

But loving the kids facilitated overlooking racial meanings and the degrading emotion work employees performed. They understood humbling themselves to be part of the job and necessary, and they were willing to sacrifice to help children they related to so closely. Two examples illustrate the processes.

Even though each KW facility had custodians, administrators ordered direct-care workers to clean floors and take garbage around the outside of the building rather than through the administration area. Workers and kids picked up garbage in the ditches along KW's property, a task I found dangerous. These beautification strategies were part of KW's efforts to make volunteers feel comfortable and their resources well invested. When Casey, a black worker, did not maintain the gym to white administrator Richard's satisfaction, he sent her an email holding her accountable, using professionalism:

CASEY [sic]: I walked in the gym this morning in preparation for a site visit with a new Board Member and was appalled by its condition . . . it still looks like a trash dump. . . . There are many people who have given of their resources to ensure that these children have a facility in which they can take pride. . . . As a Kidworks professional you have the responsibility to ensure the safety and cleanliness of your program areas. You have until I come to work at 7:30 AM Friday morning to make the gym the cleanest, most orderly, and safest facility in Sherburne.

Casey was "really offended" and confused. Had she really done something wrong? Was she not a professional? Casey tried to meet with Richard to seek some clarity, but he did "not have time." She crafted an email that expressed concern over "a lack of communication between employees and the administration" and requested he address future concerns in person. But Casey's superiors

policed her into interpreting the situation less critically. Her black supervisor told her: "You have to take stuff with a grain of salt. You have to let it roll off. You've got to not show your emotions on your face and that type of stuff." A white administrator instructed her to not take it personally because being rebuked happens to everyone. He explained the reprimand would have been worse in person. While she did not regret sending the email, these conversations led Casey to conclude: "I need to work on being submissive. I do." The next day, Richard reinforced Casey's new interpretation after a brief meeting: "He said I'm doing a good job. The gym looks good now. The request to meet with him in person was a part-time person's complaint. . . . I can see his point."

This exchange taught Casey the importance of deferential emotional labor as part of her job. When she challenged administrators' interpretation of her work and their methods for conveying criticism, supervisors quickly reinforced that others' emotional experiences mattered more than hers. They framed her reaction as overreacting and insisted that being a professional required emotional restraint and muted criticism of superiors. Professionalism regulated Casey into reinforcing a racist structure she wanted to challenge by fostering self-doubt and challenging her interpretation of mistreatment. Richard did the same above with Warner when he told him to "humble" himself. In practice, then, professionalism policed workers into *wanting* to submit to white authority.

Tamera's experiences with a white volunteer who claimed racial discrimination illustrate a second process. In a form of symbolic boundary maintenance (Schwalbe et al. 2000), black workers contrasted their commitment to kids to "wrong priorities": self-interestedness and self-promotion. Warner criticized: "There are people who come here for pay checks. . . . They're here just to get that check and go home. They're not here for the kids." To "come for a pay check" was to be "fake." Personal gain did not matter, conversely, to "genuine" people "with a heart" who were "here for the kids." Staff, in



turn, measured their own importance as workers through their self-sacrifice and child-centeredness. This practice led to colorblindness and muted criticism, particularly during conflicts. Tamera relayed:

[White volunteers] felt like they were being picked on because they were the minority in the group now. . . . Lisa was white and she felt like she didn't get any respect from the black staff. Or no one tried to really help her.

According to Tamera's account, volunteer Lisa was "really, really concerned with the kids, and they weren't accepting her." She wanted the staff to help her connect better with them, but when they did not, she charged racism. Tamera tried to broker a meeting with the relevant workers because "we don't want people unhappy." But Lisa refused and instead emailed administrators, saying "she would never step foot back in KW again and that she would continue to support the organization but that we should look at how we treat minority [white] people."

Professionalism guided Tamera's response to this and other problematic whites. Lisa provoked frustration, skepticism, and an interpretation of racism. Tamera stated: "I really doubted that that was the situation [Lisa was mistreated as a white] because we have great employees and that doesn't really make a lot of sense." Instead, she thought Lisa had unrealistic expectations that disrespected the staff: "She wanted to be patted on the back *constantly*" and "You can't come in here and expect that someone's going to baby you." She thought Lisa was like other volunteers, whose expectations were racially offensive—"I think they want to feel like I saved this poor little black kid"—and who espoused stereotypes that black kids "be like needy, can't function, semi-brain-dead, [disheartened] kids that they can hold and rock and tell them that everything is going to be okay." Other workers shared her frustration: "[An administrator] wants us to raise all this money. That's *their* job. . . . Don't ask me to go to these events. Don't make me parade kids around for all these rich people. I don't want

to do it" (Darin). Tamera wanted to challenge Lisa directly. But despite her claims that "volunteers are not VIPs" and workers "don't want to" or "have time to kiss their butts," she did not. She instead fostered Lisa's commitment so that Lisa worked events where "she can be thoroughly recognized" and "around other white people."

In this example, what Tamera wanted to do, based on her feelings of frustration due to her interpretation of racism, conflicted with what she was supposed to as a professional employee. Tamera transformed her negative feelings into positive ones based in self-sacrifice:

I deal with a lot of non-minorities [whites] on a daily basis that I wouldn't ever deal with in my regular life. But it's for the betterment of kids who look like me. . . . If I have to smile in somebody's face that I know may not really like me and would never hang in the same circles as I or speak to me in the street . . . I'm going to smile 'cause . . . it's about creating opportunities for these kids.

When Sharice hit her breaking point, she similarly stated: "I'll go on record: the only reason that I'm still here is for my girls." After discussing Lisa's situation with her bosses, Tamera altogether abandoned the racism interpretation of the volunteer deemed "really important to the organization" in favor of a new, colorblind interpretation. She attributed Lisa's complaints to a personality flaw: "We understood that it's important to maintain that relationship with her but we knew some people are just happy to be unhappy." Professionalism, thus, conditioned workers to self-regulate and overlook race.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Previous research too often treats emotional labor as racially neutral, neglecting its racial foundations and implications. This study demonstrates how emotional labor functioned as a racial project that contributed to racial hegemony through its appropriation of professionalism. I identify three social processes that fostered the consent of racial subordinates to degrading racial meanings and structuring.



First, appropriated professionalism aligned black workers' interests with white administrators' goals. Like many others, Kidworks' organizational hierarchy itself was racialized: white administrators dictated feeling rules for black, direct-care workers, even though administrators considered employees professionals. Accordingly, workers signified their competence by fulfilling the emotional labor prescribed to them rather than through freedom of expression. Opposite its "professional" designation, this emotion work was deferential in nature. Creating a refuge for kids and fostering whites' emotional investment required prioritizing others' needs, even when it created conflict. Thus, although professionalism generally provides emotional freedom, it had the opposite effect here: it legitimized the subordination of black employees by framing their emotional deference as necessary to the work. Staff who invested themselves in their work, thusly, believed in the importance of acting deferentially—for the children's sake. They *wanted* to be devoted and loyal to KW because self-sacrifice signified their worth as workers. Emotional labor reinforced racial subordination by investing black workers in submitting to whites.

Second, professionalism diffused negative emotions, which cultivate discontent with racial structuring. Emotional labor itself drew on long-standing racist stereotypes about black cultural dysfunction and white superiority and paternalism, creating resentment and frustration among black workers. These emotions fuel disruptions to stratification systems, while satisfaction, complacency, and resignation stabilize them (Jocoy 2003). But feeling scripts often deny blacks the expression of "negative" emotions (Wingfield 2010). At KW, workers learned to consider them contagions. When negative emotions did surface, supervisors used professionalism to police them. Employees repressed them, emphasizing the children's needs instead. Even though emotionally relating is often unevaluated and uncompensated, devotion made the work *feel* meaningful and important. Black employees, moreover, felt morally superior when they

juxtaposed their self-sacrifice to the superficial priorities of whites, even though emotional labor subordinated them structurally. Professionalism, consequently, mediated workers' negative emotions, thereby stabilizing the racial structure.

Third, professionalism muted racial critiques and fostered colorblindness. Under the guise of acting professionally, workers transformed their racially-laden interpretations into racially neutral ones while repressing frustration. Testimonials were no longer stereotypical but an opportunity for kids to speak publicly. Accommodating whites was not racially insulting but a fundraising necessity. Even racial interpretations of whites' belittling actions were labelled overreactions.

Thus, professionalism served as a racial project that not only drew on and reinforced racist meanings but also conditioned the emotional subjectivities of black workers so that they consented to race-based organizing. This finding has implications beyond KW to other workplaces that are racially stratified or have racialized emotional content. In the globalized capitalist economy, workplace stratification often coincides with race, and workers of color, especially women, routinely perform devalued carework. . . . Under these circumstances, emotional labor can have insidious racial consequences. . . .

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2. What did professionalism mean at Kidworks? What emotional experiences did white administrators and volunteers expect black workers to foster? How did they create these experiences?
  3. How did black workers resist what they viewed as racist and classist expectations from whites? Were they successful in resisting? Why or why not? Why didn't the workers reject professionalism? What were the consequences of professionalism for the racial hierarchy at Kidworks?
  4. Movies conjure a variety of common emotional experiences among viewers. Suspenseful movies evoke terror and excitement. Romantic comedies produce anticipation and comfort. Rags-to-riches movies inspire us and foster hope for a better future. Watch *The Blind Side*, the dramatization of football player Michael Oher's success, which earned over \$255 million at the box office and earned Sandra Bullock an Oscar for Best Leading Actress. What emotions did you feel most prominently while you watched? What other emotions did you feel and at what points in the movie? What strategies did the director and actors use to conjure those different feelings? Now consider the racial undertones of the movie or read some racial critiques. (You can do a web search or see one at: <http://www.dallasobserver.com/2009-11-19/film/the-blind-side-what-would-black-people-do-without-nice-white-folks/>.) How do you think most whites feel when watching this movie? What about blacks? What feelings do you think dominate for them? What images of blacks and whites set up your emotional responses? To what extent are these portrayals conscientious on the part of the movie makers? Does thinking about the racial content change your emotional experience? Why or why not? Where else do we see racial portrayals that are designed to evoke particular emotional responses? Alternatively, watch *Hidden Figures*, a movie about black women who worked at NASA during the space races. Ask yourself the same questions as above.

### Reflective Questions

1. What did the workplace hierarchy at Kidworks look like? Who held power, and who was paid the best?



## Escaping Symbolic Entrapment, Maintaining Social Identities

SHANE SHARP

*As we saw in Parts IV and V, identities make us feel valued and important. They provide a way for us to develop a sense of competence, and they give the world order by helping us organize our thoughts and interactions with others. For these reasons, we develop what Michael Schwalbe (2008) calls "identity stakes": investment in protecting widely valued identities that offer us important social, personal, and psychological benefits.*

*Critical events can damage people's core identities and their associated images of worthiness and order. Returning from war, injured soldiers who find themselves dependent upon others' care for the first time in adulthood may question their value. Who am I if I'm not self-sufficient? What do I have to contribute to my family and society? When an elderly spouse or partner dies after a prolonged illness, the surviving partner may wonder, who am I if not my partner's caretaker? When our identity stakes are challenged, we struggle to find new ways to make sense of the world and ourselves in it. We feel confused, overwhelmed, and lonely—until we find new identities to reorder our world or reconcile our experiences with new ways of thinking about our established identities. The soldier may come to think of herself as a hero who is owed a debt of gratitude, or the surviving partner may redirect his caretaking to his grandchildren.*

*As Shane Sharp shows us in this study of conservative Christian women abused by their partners,*

*social identities come with a unique set of identity stakes. Not only are women's conceptions of self and worthiness related to their Christian identity but so are their friendships, communities, and moral understanding. Being abused puts all of these benefits at risk for the women, and they feel trapped between enduring the damaging effects of abuse and engaging in what they see as an immoral action—divorce. Their husbands, family, friends, and religious leaders further encase women in what Sharp calls "symbolic entrapment": they overtly discourage them from divorcing, even when they are aware of the horrors of their abuse.*

*But the women in Sharp's study, like all humans, are exceedingly resourceful. They draw on the cultural resources in their social world to alleviate their conundrum. Rather than rejecting their conservative Christian values or continuing to risk their emotional and physical safety, the women develop narratives of motive that allow them to divorce while keeping their conservative Christian identities intact. They take their knowledge of religious scripture, reshape their understanding of it to apply to their situation, and then use these teachings to convince themselves and others that divorcing is not only okay but the right and Godly thing to do. They protect their identity stakes.*

*In Sharp's study, narratives of motive allow women to challenge their abuse, an abuse rooted in*

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a religious dictate that men should be heads of household and women should be submissive to them under nearly all circumstances. Their resistance not only has personal consequences but challenges a broader gender order that subordinates women to men.

Our identity stakes can also reproduce inequalities—and without us even realizing it. We may laugh when our teammates degrade someone as “retarded,” for example, because we don’t want to risk our association with the team. Or we may advocate for social policies that gut resources to the poor because we want them to go to more “worthy” people, as we see ourselves and associates. Or people may violently enforce symbolic boundaries between groups when others attack their identity stakes. Such is the case with many school shooters, who are typically young males whose peers have relentlessly teased them (Kimmel and Mahler 2003). They reestablish their “manhood” by engaging in extreme acts of violence. Identity stakes invest us in drawing symbolic boundaries, finding value and connectedness through those boundaries, and protecting the resources associated with them.

Sharp’s piece draws our attention to another important sociological psychological issue that has consequences for our understanding of inequalities: the relationship between motives and action. Social psychologists are interested in how people make sense of the inequalities they encounter. Americans often believe that everyone, regardless of their background, should have a chance to get an education, have meaningful work, and otherwise lead a fulfilling life. For many, these beliefs define the United States uniquely as a place of opportunity, hope, and personal freedom. Despite these beliefs, inequalities stubbornly persist, and inequality scholars are quick to point out that Americans often seem more interested in getting past inequalities than addressing them. That is, what they say about inequalities does not match how they act about them. In fact, scholars often think of ideologies as justifications for acting in ways that maintain a status quo that advantages a few at a cost to many. Sharp raises the prospect, though, that cultural narratives about equality and fairness need not inhibit action. Rather, they can motivate people to challenge

inequalities directly—and convince others of the justness in doing so.

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After experiencing almost a year of abuse from her husband, Tori—a conservative Church of Christ member in her early 30s—decides to leave her husband and seek a divorce in order to maintain her physical and emotional well-being. When Tori tells her husband of her intentions, he begins to shake violently and falls to the kitchen floor. He lies in a fetal position, crying and screaming that this is all because of his parents and that he is going to kill them. Afraid for her safety, Tori gets in her car and starts to drive. While behind the wheel, Tori calls her in-laws to tell them about what has occurred, fearing that her husband might follow through on his threats. With her mother-in-law on the other end of the line, Tori recounts all the details of the incident and the threats her husband made. Rather than thank her for the warning, Tori’s mother-in-law asks, “Why are you leaving him?” Tori tells her mother-in-law that she can no longer stand the abuse and that she has to leave for her own physical and psychological welfare. This is an insufficient reason for her mother-in-law—a fellow member of the Church of Christ—who tells Tori that “the sin of divorce” is going to be “on her head” because spousal abuse is not a biblical justification for divorce. Days after the incident, Tori’s husband calls to tell her that he has “been reading the Bible” and has concluded that she had no right to leave him because he had not committed adultery. He ends the call by telling Tori that she will have to answer to God on judgment day for leaving him for “nonbiblical reasons.”



Marianne—a Southern Baptist in her early 50s—decides that she has experienced enough abuse in her 10-year marriage and decides to leave her husband. While her husband is at work and her children are at school, Marianne packs suitcases for herself and her children in preparation for several nights of sleeping in hotels as they make their way to her mother's. As she packs, Marianne thinks to herself that she should seek the counsel of the pastor at her Southern Baptist congregation to make sure that leaving is the right thing to do. So, she takes a break from packing and drives to her church. She meets with her pastor and tells him about all of the violence she has suffered and how she has tried "EV-ER-Y-THING" she can to make her husband happy. Marianne tells the pastor that she feels justified in leaving her husband because of his abusive behavior. The pastor does not agree. He asks her if she is not to blame for the violence and tells her that if she goes home and submits to her husband everything will be fine. After the meeting, Marianne drives home and unpacks the suitcases. She "tries and tries and tries" to be a better wife, but the violence continues. Marianne remains in the abusive marriage for another 15 years.

As these two vignettes demonstrate, conservative Christian victims of spousal abuse often experience what I call "symbolic entrapment." Symbolic entrapment occurs when a person is prevented from taking courses of action because these actions threaten symbolic boundaries that crucially define important and salient social identities. . . .

### Symbolic Boundaries and Social Identities

Social psychologists make a distinction between personal and social identities (Owens 2003). Personal identities are conceptualizations of the self that differentiate an individual from others within a particular social context. Social identities, on the other hand, are "categorizations of the self into more inclusive social units that depersonalize the self-concept" (Brewer 1991: 477). "Conservative Christian" is a social identity because it involves

categorizations of the self as part of larger social units, which in this case would be denominational affiliation (Southern Baptist, Church of Christ, Assembly of God, etc.).

Social identities, as a number of scholars have pointed out, are defined by symbolic boundaries. Symbolic boundaries are the subjective boundaries that individuals draw using beliefs, symbols, values, and other cultural materials in order to make distinctions between themselves and others. Symbolic boundaries often define social identities relationally; that is, by defining who one is by defining who one is not. . . .

Because symbolic boundaries often refer to specific behavioral markers, they often prevent people from performing certain actions that may damage these boundaries in an effort to avoid a "spoiled" (Goffman 1963) social identity. In such cases, individuals experience symbolic entrapment. For instance, symbolic boundaries related to cultural consumption practices prevent people of high status groups from consuming culture related to the underclasses (NASCAR, professional wrestling, etc.). In addition, Mormons cannot drink caffeinated beverages because the consumption of caffeine is a behavioral symbolic boundary used to differentiate Mormons from non-Mormons.

While the above are somewhat trivial examples of symbolic entrapment, there are situations in which symbolic entrapment can be psychological and/or physically detrimental for individuals. One of these situations occurs when biblical prohibitions against divorce keep conservative Christian wives in abusive marriages.

### Conservative Christianity, Negative Attitudes toward Divorce, and Symbolic Entrapment

Various scholars document the importance of traditional family values in symbolically defining conservative Christian identities. For example, one of the most salient beliefs of conservative Christianity is the belief that the husband is the "head of



the household" and that a wife should be subordinate or "submissive" to her husband (Ammerman 1987; Bartkowski 2001; Denton 2004; Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Smith 2000).

Conservative Christians also use the belief that divorce is a sin as a symbolic boundary marker that sets them apart from what they see as the individualistic and selfish "culture of divorce" current in American society. . . .

Although viewing divorce as a sin is an important symbolic boundary marker for conservative Christians, this boundary can be detrimental if it symbolically entraps conservative Christians in bad and "unhealthy" marriages. . . .

### Responding to Symbolic Entrapment

Although not couched in the same terms, previous scholars have documented two main responses by social actors to experiences of symbolic entrapment. The first response is for social actors to remain symbolically entrapped in order to maintain their social identities. . . .

The second response to symbolic entrapment is to disavow a social identity by leaving the group to which one belongs and/or by categorizing oneself no longer as a member of the group. . . .

While the above two responses are common, there is nevertheless a third response to symbolic entrapment that previous researchers have neglected that I discovered in the course of my research on how religious beliefs and institutions affect the experiences and behaviors of intimate partner violence victims. This response consists of escaping symbolic entrapment while also maintaining one's social identity by using and creating various types of motives that make taking ordinarily boundary damaging courses of action seem appropriate in terms of a particular social group's culture.

### The Varieties of Vocabularies of Motives and Escaping from Symbolic Entrapment

C. Wright Mills (1940: 907) defines motives as statements that serve as "unquestioned answers to

questions concerning social and lingual conduct" to the various actors in a given social situation. In other words, motives are the reasons, explanations, excuses, and justifications for chosen courses of action that actors use to satisfy themselves and others. According to Mills, various groups, organizations, and societies have their own established "vocabularies of motive." For example, in American society an acceptable motive for marriage is "love." An unacceptable motive for marriage, however, is wealth, which explains the negative views of people seen as "gold-diggers" and "gigolos."

I show in this article that individuals escape symbolic entrapment while maintaining their social identities by using three distinct types of vocabularies of motive. The first type of motive is what I call normative motives. Mills (1940) argues that particular groups, institutions, and societies have shared normative vocabularies of motive for certain acts. These common or "typical" responses to or explanations for questionable behavior are well known and socially expected. . . .

The second type of motive used to escape symbolic entrapment is transforming motives. These motives convert motives ordinarily used by other groups into motives that conform to the culture of the particular social group in which the threatened social identity is based. . . .

The third type of motive used to escape symbolic entrapment while maintaining social identities is neutralizing motives. These are motives in which people admit that a course of action is wrong, but argue that they are justified, or free of blame, in taking it because of their actual or promised performance of culturally-appropriate "acts of contrition" that neutralize untoward actions. . . .

The motives I document in this analysis are not merely *ex post facto* justifications for actions; rather, I argue that they enable action—and thus allow a person to escape symbolic entrapment—by allowing individuals to take boundary damaging courses of action by mitigating the risks of these actions to their social identities. . . .



### Methods and Analysis

This article is part of a larger in-depth interview project investigating the role religion plays in the lives and experiences of intimate partner abuse victims. . . . I recruited participants for this study from the middle Tennessee and southern Wisconsin areas. . . .

I focus mainly on the experiences of 15 conservative Christian victims of spousal abuse who were previously or are currently married to their abusive partners. I focus on conservative Christians who were married to their abusive partners in the present analysis because participants of more moderate and liberal religiosities in my sample did not express experiencing any conflict between seeking a divorce from their abusive partners and the biblical prohibitions against divorce. . . .

All 15 participants who are the focus of this paper are religiously active; most attended church at least once a week, prayed more than once a day, read the Bible on a regular basis, participated in other religious activities such as Bible study, and consumed various forms of religious media such as Christian radio and popular Christian books. All participants claimed that religion was an integral and important aspect of their lives. The participants come from a variety of occupations, education levels (average number of years of education: 14.6 years), and age groups (average age: 43.5 years). Most participants are white, with one African-American and one non-native Hispanic.

I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with all 15 participants who are the focus of this study. The interviews consisted of a variety of questions that assessed the participants' demographic and religious characteristics, childhood history, abuse history, and the various ways that religion and popular culture influenced their perceptions, experiences, and decisions regarding their abusive situations. The interview also consisted of questions about their experiences with religious and secular domestic violence agencies, as well as questions that solicited advice for individuals

currently experiencing intimate partner violence and for domestic violence agencies.

### Experiencing Symbolic Entrapment

The conservative Christian victims in this study experienced strong feelings of symbolic entrapment. They wanted to divorce their abusive husbands, but at the same time they were aware that the Bible defines divorce as a sin. This experience kept many conservative Christian victims in abusive marriages much longer than they avowed they would have otherwise and caused them to feel high levels of guilt and shame for considering divorce. For example, Janine, a Church of Christ member, said that her faith's prohibitions against divorce kept her from leaving her abusive husband:

I didn't want my marriage to end in divorce like my parents' because of my religious background and upbringing in the Church of Christ. And, uh, the Church of Christ really don't believe in divorce unless it's, uh, uh, adultery. . . . That kept me from leaving. And I really thought, you know, I wasn't supposed to get a divorce.

Feelings of symbolic entrapment became explicit and were exacerbated in instances in which significant others reminded victims that the Bible prohibits divorce. For example, when Christine—a Southern Baptist—would tell her husband that she wanted a divorce, he would respond by telling her that she couldn't leave him because of her faith's prohibitions against divorce. He would also tell Christine that she would lose her Christian friends if she did divorce him:

He [my husband] would say you can't get divorced. You're a Christian and all of your Christian friends are going to frown upon and, and you won't have any friends left. . . . I think that if, you know, did anybody ever deter me or try to deter me or say anything, he [my husband] did more so than anybody ever did about me not divorcing him, [saying] God will be disappointed with you. He did it far more than anybody ever did it. . . .



### Escaping Symbolic Entrapment and Maintaining Identity Through Motives

Although they experienced symbolic entrapment, the conservative Christian spousal abuse victims I interviewed found ways to escape while maintaining their religious identities. They did so by using three distinct and nonmutually exclusive types of motives: (1) normative motives, (2) transforming motives, and (3) neutralizing motives.

#### Normative Religious Motives for Divorce

A couple of victims used normative religious motives for divorce. In both of these cases, the normative religious motive for divorce was because of sexual adultery. For example, consider Marjorie, a black Pentecostal married to an abusive husband for almost 30 years. Marjorie's husband, along with being physically and emotionally abusive, also was shamelessly sexually unfaithful. Speaking on the subject of her divorce from her husband, Marjorie told me, "Well, I sure had a reason for it [divorce] when it came to adultery (laughs)." When I asked Marjorie what she would have done if her husband had not committed sexual adultery, she claimed that she "would still be married to him." Although a response to a hypothetical situation, Marjorie's reply demonstrates the perceived importance of adequate religious motives for conservative Christian abused wives who do seek a divorce.

Marianne, the Southern Baptist in the second opening vignette, also used this motive to justify divorcing her abusive husband. Toward the end of the 25-year marriage, Marianne's husband started to have sexual affairs with prostitutes and women he met in online chat rooms. For Marianne, this was an adequate motive for divorce: "Well, he was unfaithful, and Jesus is quoted as saying that it's, well, I'm paraphrasing it, that it is acceptable to divorce your spouse for adultery."

On the individual level, normative motives easily prevent any conflict between actions and belief. Since the denominations that Marjorie and Marianne belonged to allow divorce in cases of sexual

adultery, seeking a divorce did not threaten their religious identities. These motives also work on the interpersonal level because they easily convince fellow conservative Christians of the appropriateness of their actions.

Many victims, however, did not have the "brutal luxury" of having an available normative religious motive for divorce. This is because their husbands neither had extramarital sexual affairs nor had deserted them. However, they still escaped symbolic entrapment while maintaining their Christian identities by using transforming and neutralizing motives.

#### Transforming Motives for Divorce

As stated above, transforming motives are motives that transform ordinary and pre-existing nongroup motives into motives that conform to the culture of the social group in which the threatened social identity is based. In the present case, these motives transform the secular motive for divorce (i.e., spousal abuse) into a religious one through the strategic manipulation of cultural elements of conservative Christianity. . . .

#### *Strategic Interpretation of Scripture*

One type of transforming motive that several victims used consisted of strategically interpreting scripture. With these motives, victims took advantage of the ambiguities, interpretive gaps, and contexts of various verses in the Bible in ingenious and creative ways to develop religious justifications for divorce in cases of spousal abuse.

One way in which victims strategically interpreted scripture to justify divorce in cases of spousal abuse was by contextualizing Malachi 2:16, a verse in the Bible conservative Christians often cite as proof that divorce is a sin. Several victims argued that, when read in context, this verse allows spouses to divorce because of violence. For example, consider Sara—a Church of Christ member in her early 50s. Sara remained in her abusive marriage for several years before deciding to leave. Sara recounted to me how she struggled over her



decision to leave her husband because of the biblical prohibitions against divorce. Sara resolved this struggle, however, by coming to an understanding of Malachi 2:16 as justifying divorce in cases of spousal abuse:

After it says, "God hates divorce," it says, "and God hates a man that covers himself in anger." So, that's very clear to me, that He hates divorce, but He hates that, too. . . . I believe the Bible teaches that if the marriage covenant is broken by one of the people, and being abusive to someone is breaking the marriage covenant, then your husband's already broken it by treating you this way.

Sara acknowledges that the Bible does define divorce as a sin, but she is also quick to point out that following this prohibition is a prohibition against violence. Sara ingeniously exploits this fact to assert a conditional relationship between divorce and violence: "being abusive to someone is breaking the marriage covenant." That is, she takes advantage of an interpretive gap inherent within the verse to transform the secular abuse motive for divorce into one that adheres to scripture. . . .

#### *Marital Unfaithfulness*

Another transforming motive several abused wives used consisted of a generalization of the notion of "marital unfaithfulness." That is, victims reinterpreted the biblical verses that many conservative Christians believe allow divorce in cases of sexual adultery to develop a motive for divorce in cases where sexual adultery did not occur or was not an issue. With this motive, victims took advantage of the unfixed meaning of the term "marital unfaithfulness," going beyond the common conservative Christian understanding of the term to justify divorce in their specific cases. Using this broader definition, several victims argued that they had the biblical right to divorce because their abusive husbands committed acts of "marital unfaithfulness."

For instance, consider Christine, the Southern Baptist introduced earlier. Christine remained with her abusive husband for several years because

she did not feel that she had biblical justification for leaving him. Christine finally decided to divorce her husband, however, after generalizing the notion of "marital unfaithfulness" beyond just sexual adultery. Specifically, Christine came to understand unfaithfulness as referring not only to sexual unfaithfulness, but also to "emotional unfaithfulness." She defines emotional unfaithfulness as a spouse wanting to have extramarital sexual relations, whether or not these wants are actually carried out. According to Christine, her husband committed acts of emotional unfaithfulness by constantly telling her that he wanted to have sex with other women, including her friends. By adhering to this broader definition, then, Christine came to interpret her husband's actions as evidence of marital unfaithfulness. By doing so, she was able to develop a religious motive for divorce. . . .

#### *Wish of God*

Another transforming motive that several victims used to escape symbolic entrapment is the "wish of God" motive. This motive consisted of the argument that God does not want anyone to be in an abusive marriage because of the love that He has for them. For instance, Rose—a Church of Christ member—justified her divorce from her abusive husband by arguing that "God would not want me to be injured or hurt in some manner, or dead, . . . because I am a child of God."

Rose strategically draws upon specific cultural resources inherent in conservative Christian cultures to transform a secular motive for divorce into a religious one. Two cultural resources that Rose uses in particular stand out. First, Rose employs the God-concept of a protective and loving paternal God, which is common among conservative Christian denominations and congregations. This is revealed by Rose's use of the pronoun "He" to refer to God throughout the interview and her claim that she is "a child of God." Simply put, Rose justifies her divorce by asserting that just as a loving human father would not want his daughter to be in an abusive situation, neither does the



Heavenly Father want one of his children in a situation of violence.

The second cultural resource that Rose draws upon in developing her motive is the belief that a "good" Christian has a personal relationship with God. One of the most distinctive aspects of conservative evangelical belief is the notion that a Christian should have an intimate relationship with God and Jesus Christ (Smith 2000). Rose asserts a close and personal relationship with God by claiming that she has correct knowledge of what God wants: "God would not want me to be injured or hurt in some manner, or dead." By avowing this relationship, Rose creates a religious motive, at least in part, by arguing that her intimacy with God trumps biblical authority. Thus, she exploits the various and contradictory strands of authority (textual, experiential, relational, etc.) found in conservative Christianity (Smith 2000; Woodberry and Smith 1998) to develop a motive that would allow her to divorce her abusive husband while sustaining her religious identity. Like normative motives, transforming motives work on both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. On the intrapersonal level, transforming motives relieve cognitive dissonance by making the spousal abuse motive congruent with the victims' conservative Christian beliefs. Transforming motives also work on the interpersonal level because they provide victims with biblical and theological arguments they can use to convince fellow conservative Christians of the appropriateness of their actions.

#### Neutralizing Motives for Divorce

... Neutralizing motives are those in which people admit that a course of action is wrong, but argue that they are justified or free of blame in taking it because of their performance of culturally appropriate "acts of contrition" that neutralize symbolic boundary damaging courses of action. For conservative Christian abused wives, this motive consisted of (1) an admission of having sinned for divorce and (2) claiming that one has asked God for forgiveness.

For example, consider Jane, a conservative Christian who was married to her abusive husband for a decade. Jane acknowledged that seeking a divorce from her abusive husband was a "sin" and thus damaged the symbolic boundaries that define her religious identity. She claims, however, that she has asked God for forgiveness and that the performance of this act maintains the integrity of her religious identity:

Not to say that any of it's right. Uh, whenever everybody goes through a divorce, there's sin involved on both sides. And, um, I think that, you know, I've asked for forgiveness for that and, uh, believe I have been forgiven. . . .

Like the other motives, neutralizing motives work on both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. On the intrapersonal level, they relieve feelings of cognitive dissonance by counteracting the perceived sin of divorce with the belief that God forgives sins. On the interpersonal level, neutralizing motives work by providing victims with a statement that will satisfy fellow conservative Christians who might question the validity of victims' conservative Christian identities. This statement demonstrates remorse on the part of the victim for getting a divorce and the victim's active efforts at rectification of the "sinful" act.

Of course, neutralizing motives do not easily fall into the oft-used motive categories of "justifications" and "excuses" (Scott and Lyman 1968). Motives, however, are more than this. As Mills (1940) states, "a motive tends to be one which is to the actor and the other members of a situation an unquestioned answer to questions concerning social and lingual conduct" (p. 907). In other words, motives are the statements social actors tell themselves and others that will satisfy the questioners of an act. To see the "satisfying" nature of neutralizing motives, one only needs to think of what would occur if Jane or Rachel said to a "questioning" conservative Christian (which includes themselves) that they do not believe that divorce is a sin or that they did not ask God for forgiveness if they do



believe it is a sin. Such a response would not satisfy a conservative Christian who questions these victims' decisions to seek a divorce or the validity of their conservative Christian identities.

#### Motives as Enablers of Action

Mills (1940) argues that motives are not only *ex post facto* justifications for behavior, although they also function in this way and thus resemble Scott and Lyman's (1968) notion of accounts. Rather, motives "are accepted justifications for present, future, and past programs or acts" and that the availability of acceptable motives "for different situations are significant determinants of conduct" (Mills 1940: 908, emphasis added). Sociologists, however, have focused almost exclusively on *ex post facto* rationalizations of deviant and questionable conduct. This is unfortunate, since Mills (1940) contends that empirical researchers can investigate the effects of available motives for future social action: "It is a hypothesis worthy and capable of test that typical vocabularies of motives for different situations are significant determinants of conduct" (p. 908).

Narrative data from victims who eventually divorced their husbands and "negative cases" (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in which victims either (a) did not have religious motives before they sought divorce or (b) where the motives used were not seen as appropriate by fellow conservative Christians provide evidence that Mills (1940) is right in asserting that motives are important causal factors in future social actions. Having acceptable motives enables action, I argue, by relieving the cognitive dissonance associated with taking certain courses of action and by providing individuals with arguments to convince fellow group members of the appropriateness of their actions. In other words, the availability of acceptable motives has a significant impact on whether a person successfully escapes symbolic entrapment.

Narrative data provide evidence for needing motives beforehand to relieve cognitive dissonance. As seen throughout this article, many victims recounted their internal turmoil between wanting to leave their abusive husbands and their

religious beliefs. They also told of how they solved this turmoil through developing appropriate religious motives. For example, Marjorie claims that if her husband had not been sexually unfaithful to her, she "would still be married to him." In addition, Janine said that she found "the courage to leave" once she developed a transforming motive for divorce. Also, . . . Christine . . . recounted how [she] did not feel comfortable seeking [a] divorce from [her] husband until [she] reinterpreted "marital unfaithfulness."

A "negative case" in my sample also provides evidence that motives enable action by relieving cognitive dissonance. One conservative Christian in my sample—Tori—did not have a religious motive for divorce before she actually divorced her husband. According to Tori, she divorced her abusive husband after almost a year of marriage because she did not want to be a victim and because she felt that she did not deserve to suffer from abuse. Tori experienced a tremendous amount of guilt, however, because she did not have a religious motive for divorcing. These feelings influenced Tori's behavior in several ways. First, they caused her to return to her husband after the first time she left, which occurred around the sixth month of marriage. When I asked Tori why she went back, she said because she "didn't want to be a failure in the church." The guilt that Tori felt for leaving her abusive husband was especially salient when she left her abusive husband for good. Her comments indicate that the main source of this guilt came from her perceived violation of biblical teachings:

Because, you know, biblically we were taught that you should stick it out, and you should be married for life. You know, it doesn't matter how much society is getting divorced, it's still in your head. It's still a shame and guilt and you feel like you're used after you get divorced. . . . In the eyes of God and everybody else you married this person. And now you're telling the world that, "Oh, well, I didn't mean what I meant. I'm out of here." You know, "Oh, well the going gets tough I'm just going to go."



When I asked Tori if she still felt guilty five years after her divorce became final, she said no. She no longer felt guilty because she now had a transforming motive (here, the “wish of God”) that helped her relieve the cognitive dissonance caused by the discrepancy between her actions and her religious identity: “Jesus was a lover of women and a protector of women when He walked on Earth. . . . God would not feel bad that I did what I had to do.”

There also is evidence from narratives that motives enable action by offering explanations that convince fellow group members of the appropriateness of actions. The opening vignette with Marianne demonstrates that not having motives accepted by fellow conservative Christians prevents people from taking certain courses of action. More positively, many victims recounted to me how they felt justified in getting divorced because their family, friends, and other significant others accepted their motives.

A negative case in my sample also provides evidence for the claim that having accepted motives influences whether or not a person takes a particular course of action. I interviewed Carol—a Church of Christ member—several times over the course of two years. Carol was living in a transitional housing program for domestic violence victims when I first met her. At that time, Carol was seriously considering divorcing her abusive husband. She had the appropriate legal documents filled out and sitting on the dresser in her apartment. When I asked Carol why she felt justified in seeking a divorce, she said because her husband’s abusive behavior was not reflective of how “Christ loved the church.” However, Carol’s best friend and fellow Church of Christ member, Molly, told her that the only biblically appropriate reason for getting a divorce is when the spouse commits adultery: “[My friend said,] well, you know the only scriptural reason for divorce in the Bible is adultery.” Carol admitted that this conflict between her motive for divorce and her friend’s claim that divorce is only allowed in cases of adultery made her hesitant to file the divorce papers: “I’m stuck sort

of in the middle, and I guess that’s why I haven’t gotten my divorce, because I’m still trying to make up my mind.”

I interviewed Carol six months later, and she had since made up her mind. She was trying to “work things out” with her husband, and she wanted to make her marriage “work.” When I asked her what caused this change in attitude, Carol told me about an incident in which a Church of Christ preacher told her that if she divorced, she would have to remain unmarried and celibate for the rest of her life. He said this even though he was fully aware of her husband’s abusive behavior:

He [the Church of Christ preacher] says to me, “I want to look at you and I want to be honest with you, because if you divorce him [your husband], or he divorces you, you have to live a life of celibacy. Are you ready to think about that?”

In short, Carol decided not to divorce her abusive husband because she did not have a motive that satisfied her preacher.

I talked with Carol again six months later. She was once again living with her husband. When I asked Carol why she made the decision not to divorce her husband, she said because she didn’t “want to go to Hell.” When I probed into what she meant by this, Carol told me that it says in the Bible that she cannot get a divorce unless adultery is involved. Since she had no proof that her husband committed sexual adultery, Carol said that she had to forgive him and try to make her marriage work. When I asked her how she came to this decision, she cited her encounter with the Church of Christ preacher above. Although Carol admitted to me that she was still afraid that her husband might abuse her again, she was determined to make her marriage “work.”

### Discussion and Conclusion

Symbolic entrapment is a ubiquitous part of social life. People often do not perform certain actions because they threaten the symbolic boundaries that define important and salient social identities. This may even be the case in situations in which



these actions might be in the best interests of the individual, as when symbolic boundaries related to conservative Christian identities keep individuals in abusive marriages. By using the case of conservative Christian victims of spousal abuse, I theorize that individuals are able to escape symbolic entrapment while also maintaining their identities by using normative, transforming, and neutralizing motives that make these courses of action seem appropriate within the cultural context of social groups. These motives help individuals escape symbolic entrapment by relieving cognitive dissonance and by providing them with culturally-resonant arguments and statements that convince fellow group members of the appropriateness of their actions.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is symbolic entrapment? What does it feel like to be symbolically entrapped? How do individuals typically escape symbolic entrapment, according to previous research? Why don't the women in this study do the same? How did other people contribute to the symbolic entrapment experienced by the women here?
2. What vocabularies of motive helped women to leave their abusers but maintain their Christian identities? How do they help women to satisfy themselves that they are acting appropriately? How do they help women satisfy others?
3. Sharp argues that motives do not simply justify actions to others but also enable future action. How do they serve this function?
4. Draw a circle on a sheet of paper to create a pie. Generate a list of the *social* identities most important to you. Then divide the pie chart according to their salience to you and label each section of the chart. Looking at the chart, which social identity is most important to you? What kinds of benefits do you get from this identity? If you suddenly could no longer claim this identity, how would you feel? What relationships and resources would you lose? Would you lose other social benefits? Think of a behavior or two that is repugnant to people within that group. What social conditions could compel you to act that way? Do you know people who have engaged in that behavior? How did they reconcile the conflict between their identity and their actions? What sort of vocabularies of motive did they—or could you—use to convince themselves and others to act in that way?



## Wrangling Tips: Entrepreneurial Manipulation in Fast-Food Delivery

ALEX I. THOMPSON

Sociologists define power as the ability to get people to do what you want them to, even when they do not want to. People in structural positions with power impose systems of meaning and action on others because people view their way of doing things as legitimate or fear negative recourse. Within workplaces, administrators, executives, and managers can compel their employees to act or think in ways they otherwise would not. This is true in service industries which rely heavily on face-to-face interactions with customers and clients. For example, executives and managers of restaurants commonly mandate how tasks will be divided and performed in minute detail, what employees can and cannot wear to work, and how they should interact with customers. If workers fail to comply, they risk being disciplined or even fired.

As Hochschild's study showed, supervisors' mandates can go far beyond "the customer is always right" to dictate what employees should say and feel. Sophisticated surveillance and reward structures and other nets of accountability (Schwalbe 2008) encourage employees to follow dictates and internalize them. Even then, though, employees seldom passively accept the boss' definition of situations. Rather, they subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, resist efforts of those in more structurally powerful positions to shape their conduct and thinking. They draw upon local and cultural sources of power in those efforts and protect their

sense of self from organizational definitions of who they should be.

Service exchanges, importantly, involve other groups of actors—customers or clients—who bring their own expectations to interactions and influence the livelihood, self, and feelings of workers. For workers who rely on tips to earn a living, pleasing the boss while maintaining an authentic self is only one concern. Maximizing tips is another.

In this study of fast-food deliverers, Thompson shows how delivery drivers strategically interact with customers in ways that "wrangle tips," even though deliveries are fleeting interactions. Tips are crucial to the drivers' livelihood (they pay for their own gas and car repairs), and they feel jilted by non-tippers. The boss at the calzone restaurant under study gives employees considerable room to act how they want, except he prohibits asking for tips. But the displeasure drivers derived from "being stiffed" leads them to craftily devise ways, sometimes collectively, to draw on their interactional power to ensure customers give them their due compensation. They create affinity with customers by dressing and talking like they do. They act excessively outgoing and pleasant. They coerce customers by assuming that extra money is a tip, and when subtle tactics fail, drivers shame customers and threaten reprisal. With the support of a boss who was willing to stop serving bad customers and colleagues

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who passed along knowledge about how to get tips, drivers more often got what they needed and wanted.

*The sociological psychological lessons in this piece are many. First, we see how power is enacted in interaction by breaching social expectations, even when the other party seems to have the upper hand. Second, we see how people draw on important social statuses to protect themselves in interaction, in this case being a student and a "bro." Finally, we see how low-wage workers in the gig economy can leverage interactions to stave off being exploited by customers who would rather pay them less because they can.*

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#### Control and Empowerment in Customer Service

...[T]he gratuity exchange persists as a pervasive and lucrative facet of the twenty-first-century service economy. By and large, restaurant patrons do not consider service quality in choosing how much to tip servers (Bodvarsson and Gibson 1994, 1997; Lynn and McCall 2000; Seltzer and Ochs 2010). . . . [T]he most significant predictor of tip size is the amount of the customer's bill (Bodvarsson and Gibson 1994, 1997; Seltzer and Ochs 2010).

Yet . . . service laborers view tips as customers' intentioned expression of gratitude for their efforts and as a display of appreciation for them as individuals (Davis 1959; Ginsberg 2001; Mars and Nicod 1984; Sheahan and Smith 2003). Given that the majority of contemporary service work carries with it minimum wage and strict guidelines for dress, speech, and comportment, one of the only remaining avenues for self-evaluation and individualism is the gratuity (Hodson 2001; Hoffman 2006). A small or missing tip is often viewed as a blatant display of disrespect for the worker.

The end result of the asymmetry between customer and service-provider tip orientation is a

paradox of muddled meanings in which both customers and laborers read the tip as a reflection on themselves. . . .

#### Service Labor

... An intuitive idea commonly held about our modern capitalistic economy is that the power in a service exchange lies with the purchaser. Customers control the nature of the interaction through overt demands and the occasional, and seemingly variable, gratuity. . . .

Despite their subjugation and disempowerment, workers often claim the reins in the service relationship through subtle, or not so subtle, manipulative practices (Scull 2013; Pasko 2002). . . . Through the use of subtle tactics, including physical contact with patrons (Hubbard et al. 2003), crouching down at tables to talk with customers (Leodoro and Lynn 2007; Lynn and Mynier 1993), added enthusiasm (Tsai 2001), and writing personal messages and expressions of gratitude on patrons' receipts (Rind and Bordia 1995; Rind and Strohmets 1999; Seiter and Gass 2005), restaurant servers find ways to create a feeling of personal connection and a desire to tip more generously in customers. This is especially the case in situations where service workers can establish long-term relationships with customers, personalizing their service to a much greater degree (Harlow 2003; Godwyn 2006). . . .

In the most extensive and often cited research, Paules (1991, 46) documented "the waitress's power of resistance, her spirit of defiance and her ability to manipulate her work environment to protect her interests." Service workers are subordinate to customers because of workplace norms and cultural notions of domestic work (George 2008; Paules 1991; Sharpe 2005). Waitresses and those in similar occupations gain power and control by influencing the exchange. In this research, I address a void in our knowledge about these processes and practices by uncovering how they unfold for a demographically high status group: white, highly educated, male service providers. I highlight the increased



behavioral latitude that their social position and working autonomy afford them as they perform their service role.

### Setting and Methods

During my second year as a graduate student, I took on a part-time job as a delivery driver for what is in this paper referred to as Jake's. Jake's was an independent restaurant located in the Northeastern United States primarily offering calzones for take-out and delivery, though delivery accounted for the vast majority of the small restaurant's business. . . .

Those employees who had chosen or been hired for the position of delivery driver were unfailingly white men, conforming to the American stereotype of the "delivery guy." Like his kitchen-staff counterparts, each driver was either a current or former college student. . . .

When viewed as a spoke on the wheel of the service economy, Jake's was unique in its inner-workings. The owner and manager, Dan, was anything but tyrannical in his management approach. He guided the delivery drivers with a singular, superficial admonishment: "Don't ask for tips." His hands-off approach fostered a laissez-faire system among the drivers. . . .

Between 80 and 90 percent of Jake's customers were students attending the local university. The majority of these students lived in on-campus housing inaccessible to Jake's drivers. The drivers were required to call the customers prior to their arrival to the dormitory and ask the students to exit the building to receive their delivery. Consequently, Jake's drivers had to contend with a minuscule time window in which to entice a tip in addition to a young population of customers who had little or no experience with or understanding of the gratuity exchange. . . .

. . . Over the next year, I worked one or two shifts each week, amounting to between eleven and twenty-two hours of participant observation each week. As a full-fledged delivery driver, I was able to achieve the "embodied presence in the daily lives of those who host the research" that Emerson

and Pollner (2001, 239) call for in ethnographic research. . . .

Following eight months of participant observation, I conducted semistructured interviews with eleven of my fellow drivers. . . . Integrating interviews and the opportunity to discuss with other drivers the phenomena that I had noted to myself in the previous months allowed me to step outside of my own perspective as a driver (Reiner and Newburn 2000).

### The Tip Venture

Throughout my work as a participant observer in this minute corner of the fast-food delivery world, I was fascinated by the place and power of the gratuity. A collection of coins or a few singles may mark the divide between destitution and security, between sorrow and elation. There is more entangled in a tip than a mechanical offer of leftover currency. The tip is saturated with inequality, contrition, silence, and restitution.

### Making Ends Meet

The tip was central to the financial well-being of Jake's drivers. On average, each driver earned an hourly wage of \$6.00. However, on a busy weekend evening, drivers' wages plus their tips often averaged over \$16.00 per hour. It was crucial that they made this much, for while they were not required by the management to report their tips on income taxes, they were also not reimbursed for "mileage," the expenses incurred for gas and maintenance costs.

Aaron was a soft-spoken, fun-loving, willowy, twenty-three-year-old driver and recent graduate of the neighboring university who prided himself on "dressing nice" in his deceased grandfather's collection of corduroy pants, collared shirts, and cardigans. He explained the pressure imposed by maintenance costs:

Last year I ended up spending over two thousand dollars in repairs on my truck. It was less than I made in tips for the year so overall it's worth it but it does add up to be a lot and when it happens it's unexpected. Then if you don't fix it, you don't have



a job. But you need the job to make the money to fix it otherwise you have no way to fix it.

Aaron wasn't alone in facing expensive and unexpected car issues and their inherent paradox. During my year as a driver, seven of the eleven other drivers experienced some type of automobile malfunction that required immediate attention. These issues included flat tires, a broken axle, bent wheel, blown radiator, and malfunctioning heating system.

Regularly getting "stuffed" (receiving no tip) or earning small tips were significant threats to Jake's drivers' ability to remain employed. However, increasing tips was not a simple matter of openly urging customers to tip more generously. The drivers initially experienced ample fear and embarrassment at the thought of openly soliciting tips from customers. In American commerce, the gratuity is one of the metaphoric elephants in the room (Zerubavel 2006) that we attempt to squeeze around in order to maintain the silence necessary to avoid embarrassment and conflict between customers and laborers (De Volvo 2003; Ginsberg 2001; Sutton 2007).

I mused in my fieldnotes after learning of this sentiment among the drivers:

I could *never* ask a customer for a tip! First of all it's just rude. Second, how degrading! I'm not going to beg these kids for a couple of dollars. They're younger than me and I'm going to bet far less intelligent and I have to debase myself for gas money?! No. I won't.

I realized that I was not alone in harboring these feelings as a novice driver. For Jake's drivers to solicit tips was for them to demean themselves in front of customers of a very similar class and educational background. After writing the above passage, I interviewed Travis, a stout twenty-four-year-old vocational student with a penchant for using crude humor to elicit disgusted responses from the drivers. I asked him to describe a similar sentiment he felt early on:

Q: You said it was "hard" for you to ask for tips at first. Tell me about that?

A: I think a lot of people perceive it as this kind of private thing where there's not supposed to be an interaction between the tipper and the tippee about the tip. I think there's kind of this social boundary where you don't ever [pause] I think it's just that kind of weird thing where you're just not supposed to interact about it. It's just something you have to get past if you're gonna make it as a driver.

Once able to "get past," as Travis put it above, the embarrassment of openly broaching the topic of the tip with customers, drivers used similar techniques to aid in the process of soliciting tips.

I encountered myriad examples of a form of "deep acting" that Hochschild (1979, 1983) referred to as "cognitive work." In further developing these notions in the context of restaurant work, Gatta (2002) proposed that one of the primary goals in emotion management is seeking "emotional balance." Gatta noted the ways that individuals bring their emotions under control through "rebalancing scripts," mantras that contextualize distressing events. Goffman (1959, 51) described this process as the "maintenance of expressive control." The goal in this process is "tacitly experiencing emotions during everyday interactions" (Gatta 2002, 2).

Given the many stressors Jake's drivers faced, a common goal among them was reaching this "emotional balance" in order to make a shift more emotionally manageable and financially successful. An assiduous twenty-two-year-old student and Alabama native with a thick southern drawl, John summed up this practice for me one evening stating, "I don't care if they're a jerk as long as they tip me. You know, I don't take anything personally." One of the major instigators of this balancing process was dealing with intoxicated customers. Ben, a demure eighteen-year-old student driver with an unfaltering smile and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of baseball caps, explained,



I'm learning to not hate them now just so my sanity and life is easier. It would be way too hard to work this job if you couldn't just brush off drunk people since that's probably 80% of the people we're delivering to a lot of the time, mostly in the high-stress parts of the night. But also that's the good thing about only having to interact with them for like 15 seconds. You get in and out. That's sort of how you have to think of it. I mean it's like a factory line almost when you're dealing with the customers.

Ben's reflection highlights the common recognition among Jake's drivers of the advantage given to them by the brevity of the exchange with customers, a notion that they could endure anything that brief. Additionally, as Paules (1991) documented among waitresses, the drivers approached and spoke of customers as things to be managed and immediately forgotten.

Despite the challenge often posed by intoxicated customers, drivers most commonly discussed doing cognitive work in order to negate their displeasure at being "stiffed." If they did not suppress their anger, they felt, their subsequent transactions and tipping opportunities would be hindered. The drivers believed that their attitude and countenance were significant variables in the tipping equation. Karl, the oldest of the drivers (38) and an adamant believer in and proselytizer of political conspiracy theories, described his reaction to being stiffed by a customer early on in his delivery career and how he came to adopt an appreciation for the importance of reining in his emotions:

I would just be like: "Aw! This guy is a total jerk! How could he not give me a tip!?" Or: "This girl is sooo mean!" It would actually hurt my feelings, you know? But that's just something that I've gotten over after so many times of it happening. It's like: "Well, that person is a jerk and if I let it get to me, my game is gonna be off. My tips will suffer for the rest of the night so I just gotta let it roll off.

Learning to make ends meet in the tip venture entails redefining customers' tipping behavior as

reflective of their magnanimity and of cultivating a continually forward-looking orientation.

### Seeking Affinity

Before entering into face-to-face interactions with customers, Jake's drivers often sought to ensure the greatest possible degree of affinity with them by mirroring their customers' outward appearance and demeanor. They attempted to open the "boundaries of the transaction" (Mars and Nicod 1984) and reach what Godwyn (2006) termed "status equilibrium" by connecting with customers on a common ground. The drivers were well aware that "body idiom" (dress and appearance) is a significant indicator of individuals' affiliations (Goffman 1959, 13). The choice to wear a specific item of clothing or jewelry is a form of passive social communication and identity expression (Davis 1985; Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton 1991; Stryker 1981; Tseelon 1992). Consequently, the drivers focused intently on scrutinizing customers' external appearances in order to preemptively bring their performances in line with customers'. Such a chore is conceivably less arduous on a college campus full of young adults actively forming selves around future statuses by ardently displaying the necessary accouterments.

Philip was an exceedingly reticent thirty-one-year-old full-time driver who only broke his silence among the others to make a witty retort or observation, but the other drivers held him in high esteem for his manipulative prowess. Philip shared his command of the subtleties of affinity:

With jobs like this, you have to be so keen on your own body language, the words you're using, and how you're talking to someone. There are so many nuances you have to think about. From something like this, you learn that your appearance and behavior really influence your interactions; it can definitely make a big difference.

Foremost, as the vast majority of Jake's customers were students of the local university, the drivers emphasized or faked their status as students. This was done primarily through their dress and





grooming. Though he had been relegated to only working as a fill-in driver because of his unreliability and ill temperament, twenty-three-year-old Seth professed the importance of hygiene. In my interview with him, Seth reflected on his reasoning for shaving immediately before his shifts:

A: I've noticed that I average better clean-shaven.

Q: Do you mean you make more in tips?

A: Yeah. I usually average around two dollars when I haven't shaven but when I have, I get up around two-fifty, sometimes three. I think when I haven't shaved they don't believe I could be a student. They think I'm just some guy delivering.

Q: So you fake being a student?

A: Definitely. But you should look nice. Wear nice clothes when you deliver.

Seth's comments highlighted the intersecting concerns of the drivers as they sought affinity with customers. The goal was to forefront or fake student status and, at the same time, respectability. I discussed this phenomenon with Josh, an eager twenty-year-old student driver who seemed to be continually searching for a new place to live "just for a couple of nights" because of a predilection for destructive partying. Josh further explained this intricate web of considerations, specifically highlighting race and class:

When you look at the demographics of the campus, it's mostly middle class and middle- upper class white kids. If you present yourself as such and talk with them on that level when you're delivering them food, they're gonna be more apt to probably throw you an extra couple bucks because they'll think like: "Oh, this kid is just like me" rather than "Oh this guy is a scumbag delivering calzones and living in his mom's basement. Why should I give him my money?" If you kind of present yourself in a way where they could almost picture themselves on the other side of it, then you can do better.

As Seth and Josh highlighted, to be seen as a member of the customers' social strata, or slightly

below, was of great concern to drivers. Consequently, to see Jake's drivers wearing the standard uniform was an extreme rarity. The drivers perceived the uniform to be a boundary against their connecting with customers.

If the drivers did not wish to pass as students, they would often focus on, as Seth mentioned, wearing slightly formal attire. Aaron clarified:

You know, I've found that it helps a lot that I usually wear a button-up shirt. I've noticed that when I do that I get a lot better tips. I think that being able to connect with customers and look kind of normal helps to increase tips. You want to be clean and for them to think you come from a solid background but you want them to know that you really still need a job therefore they should help you out a little. Like I would tend to think that the nicer your car is, the less you're going to get tipped because they assume you don't need it.

I also noted a driver who took notice of major football and basketball games being televised during his shift and brought jerseys corresponding to the teams with him on deliveries. When time allowed, he would consult customers' phone numbers on their receipts and don the jersey of the team he felt their hometown or region would predispose them to preferring. As Kaiser, Nagasawa, and Hutton (1991, 172) pointed out in their discussion of clothing and self-presentation, such intentioned clothing modifications allow actors "to conceal and reveal simultaneously." Through similar efforts, drivers divined the most profitable "part" (Goffman 1959, 16) to play.

Jake's drivers tailored their behavioral demeanor to match customers'. Based on what they could recall from previous deliveries, pick up during brief phone conversations, and perceive in the opening moments of their delivery, drivers reported attempting to mirror, or "read," customers' attitudes and personalities as closely as possible. Jacobs (1992) noted a similar technique used among undercover cops aimed at engendering comfort in criminal targets. Cody, a twenty-three-year-old





kind-natured native of Minnesota with an accompanying accent, attempted to teach me his approach to this practice:

When I'm taking a delivery, if I took that person's order on the phone, I try to remember them and read their behavior. When I call them later, I try to read their behavior a little more and act like one of their friends or whatever I perceive one of their friends *would* be like. Like, I'll listen for their tone of voice, you know, their type of speech pattern, whether they're drunk, or studying, or whatever. I'll try to connect with them on that.

I asked Cody to elaborate on this by providing me with two hypothetical cases. He indulged me:

Say you have someone who's drunk and someone who is probably studying. With the drunk person, especially if they were loud when I called them, I'd try to be all like "bro." I'd be like: "Totally awesome! I'll meet you outside in like five minutes!" Or, if they seem really laid back, I'll be like: "Alright, man. Cool. I'll be there in three minutes. You wanna meet me outside? Is that cool?" Then when I get there, I'll be like: "You got an exam tomorrow?" Or, if it's someone who's wasted, I'll be like: "Man! Looks like you're havin' a great time tonight! I wish I wasn't workin' and could join ya!"

This dependence on broad client typologies (Mennerick 1974) for providing prepackaged repertoires of voice tones, postures, and colloquialisms was most noticeable in the drivers' varying approaches to men and women. The drivers generally showed greater concern for being perceived as a potential friend, or "bro," of male customers. They attempted to achieve this through such practices as referencing jokes or catchphrases in popular culture, endorsing alcohol and drug consumption, and commenting on recent sporting events. On the other hand, the drivers felt it most important for female customers to perceive them as nonthreatening and enticing. They strove for this by adopting a soft voice tone, unthreatening

and unassuming posture, and nurturing, minimal, though polite, conversation.

### Killing with Kindness

A notion common to Jake's drivers was that approaching customers enthusiastically and politely would garner greater tips. They talked about a convivial greeting as the most prominent. Tsai (2001) uncovered a similar belief among retail sales associates. Jake's delivery drivers often evinced a polite and generous manner in the hope of encouraging the emergence of a similar temperament in customers. Pugh (2001, 1020) termed this tendency, where "exposure to an individual producing a positive or negative emotion can produce a corresponding change in the emotional state of the observer," as "emotional contagion."

I talked with Nate, a twenty-one-year-old who complemented his quirky flannel shirts and thick mustache with a wry sense of humor, about this practice. He acquainted me with the nature and utility of killing with kindness and the seeming inherence of the skill within successful drivers:

It takes some getting used to because you have to be extremely social. Be really nice to people; be all enthusiastic. It doesn't work all the time but it works enough to boost up your tip averages because you can see the drivers who are generally pretty friendly and they tend to do better. The best drivers we have, they're generally pretty social people. They make more money than anyone because they know how to talk to people. It definitely takes a specific kind of person to do delivery. Generally they're pretty social but not in the most typical sense. They're outgoing but not the most outgoing. They are very [pause] socially aware.

This social awareness led the most successful drivers to seek out ways to compliment and connect with their customers. Seltzer and Ochs (2010) documented servers doing so through intensively engaging with customers' children. I asked Jared during a Friday evening shift if he had ever tried



anything similar. I later recorded his response in my fieldnotes:

Yep! You know what really works? Dogs. You compliment their dogs. I had two deliveries on Wednesday with dogs so I got down [he crouched down on one knee as if to pet a dog] and was like: "Wow! That's an adorable dog!" Then they each gave me five!

Overhearing my conversation with Jared, John approached me a few minutes later:

On my first delivery yesterday, this kid had an Atari shirt on and I said: "Aw man! That's a really cool shirt!" Then I started talking to him about the weather and stuff. I got almost a five-dollar tip out of that. So maybe he was planning on giving me a good tip in the first place but I like to think that being cordial makes at least somewhat of a difference to a couple people.

The Jake's drivers, however, were aware of the need to temper this enthusiasm in specific contexts. As Nate reflected when I interviewed him, gender was a particular consideration:

Sometimes women can be more shy. You know what I was saying earlier about customers sometimes not wanting to converse and all of that, I think that's more the case with girls some of the time. If it's 1:30am, I'm just some random guy showing up at their door. So I think they're just thinking: "Give me my food and let me get the *fuck* out of here!" so I'm not going to try any small-talk, you know?

Nate's comment underlined the gendered nature of drivers' use of killing with kindness. When directed at male customers, drivers employed this technique in an intense, dynamic fashion. The drivers approached female customers with more caution and inhibition. In both cases, however, the drivers felt that they were encouraging generosity in the customers.

Early on in picking up on the successes of the drivers who employed and appreciated the contextual

nature of these tactics, I reflected on my attempts to do the same in my fieldnotes:

Lately, I've been pushing myself to be as outgoing and enthusiastic as possible. It's incredibly rewarding because the more I succeed at it, the more I make in tips. I'm to the point where I feel as though I'm performing during my entire shift. Tonight, feeling quite prideful about my newfound success, I said to Nick: "I've been trying to be really gregarious, really excited and outgoing, giving customers a really nice greeting." Nick slowly shook his head of thick, black, curly hair, pursed his lips, and warned me: "Be careful though. You can't be *too* nice. If you're too nice, they're not gonna tip you. You can't be too nice because then they don't think they need to tip you because you're not going to be mean to them or yell at them if they don't."

Nick's warning highlighted a common conception among the drivers that kindness is a necessary starting point of the delivery confrontation but a successful driver must understand how to show it in moderation and to hastily discard it when necessary.

### Coercing

Drivers used coercion to tacitly pressure customers to tip and to tip more generously. In most cases, drivers avoided overtly mentioning the tip but attempted to imply its absence. The complete absence of a tip most often occurred when a customer paid by credit card over the phone and failed to write an amount on the "Gratuity" line when signing the receipt for the driver. A few months after I started at Jake's, I lamented to Cody, the kind Minnesotan, that I was often stiffed in this way. I recalled, in the fieldnote excerpt below, the innocuous and effective strategy he suggested to overcome this situation:

Smiling and shaking his head in feigned impatience, Cody said: "So here's what you do. If they hand you the receipt back and you see that they didn't write in a tip, you hand it back to them without handing them their food. See, you keep the food ransom. Then, you say [pause] make sure



you say it *just* like this: 'Hey, could you please do me a favor and fill in the total lines?' Make sure you get the 's' on the end of 'line.' Then they'll have to look at the gratuity line again and usually give you a dollar or two."

This technique allowed drivers to imply their desire for a tip without overtly mentioning it, giving them deniability if customers confronted them.

If drivers had to provide customers with change, on the other hand, they rarely willingly provided the full amount because customers often kept everything given back to them. Seth described how drivers chose their words carefully in this situation:

I don't generally put a number in their mouth. I won't say like: "Do you want six dollars back?" Instead, I'll be like: "Oh! Cool! You wanted to give me a six dollar tip, right?!" If they didn't, they'll usually correct you, but maybe when they see how excited you are, they'll just let you keep it. Plus, I find that people tip you more if they're thinking about how much they're giving you instead of how much you're giving them back.

As Llewellyn (2011) chronicled among homeless magazine vendors, Seth and the other drivers had multiple techniques of this nature where they meticulously chose their words and their handling of money in order to subtly pressure customers. However, when customers were seemingly intent on not tipping, Jake's workers dispensed with Seth's type of delicateness.

When Jake's drivers confronted customers who refused to tip, they pressured them to reconsider through aggression and threats of reprisal. Gender was a major shaper of the drivers' approach. As Nate mused, drivers perceived women as more susceptible to intimidation:

I think in general I get better tips from girls than I do from guys. I'm not exactly sure why. I think if they don't tip then they're more likely to tip generously right after the fact just because of social pressures. I think there is more pressure on girls to conform and be submissive. So when there's

a male driver there saying: "Hey! You didn't give me a tip!" then they're more likely to give you something.

The restaurant owner supported and demonstrated the use of aggressive practices to secure tips. With his characteristic raspy voice, vacant expression, and slow responses, Nick recalled during my interview with him:

I'll usually ask: "No tip?!" Then usually they'll like make stuff up like: "Oh, I thought I tipped online." Those people are assholes. They get a mouth-full at that. I swear at them a little bit. But some will be like: "Oh! Oh! I thought it was already in there" and they'll have a couple of bucks for you or they'll have cash or something. It works out pretty well. I delivered to a guy and I was like: "No tip?" and he was like: "Oh, my bad" as if it were some kind of mistake he'd made. Then he just walked inside and closed the door. [The store owner] called him. You could tell from the way he said it he was pissed off. He said: "It's customary to at least tip a dollar, you know? We can still add it to the card." But still the guy refused. He just said: "Nope." But now, thanks to [the owner], that guy can't order anymore. Asshole.

This type of vilification of a customer was extremely common amongst the Jake's delivery crew, particularly when the lulls between deliveries allowed the drivers a few moments of respite from the road. They often took up the chore of justifying their unique brand of customer service, of redefining "bad, wrong, inept, [and] unwelcome" acts as situationally acceptable (Scott and Lyman 1968, 46). In condemning the customers, as Jared did below late one evening to the delight of the other drivers, they helped shield each other from negative self-evaluation related to their more aggressive tip solicitation attempts:

These kids! Sometimes they don't even know what building they live in! They tell the person taking the order a different name than they give us over the phone and then end up living halfway across



campus from that! These kids are the bottom of the barrel. And when I say bottom, I mean the b-o-t-t-o-m of the barrel [pause] and not like a peanut barrel where they're all salty and delicious. This is like the bottom of [pause] the bottom of a chip barrel. You know? Where there are all the tiny chip pieces that nobody wants or uses.

In another incident, one famous in Jake's folklore and representing the extreme end of the spectrum of Jake's driver tactics, a former driver threw a customer's order on the ground after being refused a tip. Though the customer complained to the owner, the driver was not reprimanded. Recognizing the novelty of this occurrence, John confided in me: "If you were a waiter in a sit-down restaurant and did that, you'd get fired. But here, with Dan, you know he has your back on anything. I've seen *him* yell at customers on the phone."

Though I did not encounter him shouting at customers, I did overhear the owner employ the same type of tip-oriented coercion as his drivers while speaking with customers on the phone. In one instance, he used a theatrically dramatic tone to ask a customer: "Ooooh. Are you *sure* you don't want to add a tip to your bill?!" By supporting the drivers in their coercive strategies, the owner maintained rapport among the drivers and, more importantly, he subtly shored up his practice of paying them the state minimum wage for food servers and not compensating them for the cost of gas or vehicle maintenance.

### Shaming

When they did not receive or did not expect to receive tips from customers, Jake's drivers often attempted to shame them into tipping. The drivers tacitly believed that a majority of customers were well aware of the normative expectations surrounding the gratuity and consciously chose not to honor them out of stinginess or malice. In its most benign form, drivers shamed customers by calling attention to the absence or minuteness of the tip in hopes that customers' embarrassment

would drive them to provide a tip or to increase it. John explained:

I think in some sense they feel like they shouldn't have to tip you. They have to pay for Jake's *and* a driver. So they want to make do with as little as possible but they know that social norms sort of require something so I guess people are really uncomfortable about it and you see that when you call people out for not tipping. Because, they *know* they're stiffing you; they just hope you're not going to do anything about it. The more you can sort of bring to the attention of people that the money is an issue, the more that they'll realize they can't screw you and that they should give you your due.

John's point demonstrates the core objective for Jake's drivers in their shaming efforts: to breach the silence commonly surrounding tipping in service exchanges and, consequently, to financially benefit from customers' embarrassment.

Echoing a vindictive practice documented among waitresses by Paules (1991), Josh described his preferred approach to bringing his customers' attention to undersized tips:

I always carry a little bit of change with me in case it's like \$6.88 or \$13.76 and they just want to give me like \$7 or \$14, so a \$0.12 or \$0.24 tip. I pull out the change and I give it to them and say: "You obviously need this more than I do!" They get upset but they *get it* then. Then they usually either tip the next time or they dig into their pocket and pull out a tip then. I did it this one time to this girl. It was \$6.88 and I gave her the \$0.12 and she got *really* upset. But it's okay because she got the message.

Gatta (2002) termed this face-saving practice, by service workers, of turning away minute tips "tip sacrificing." Choosing a less direct approach, Travis provided non-tipping customers with the opportunity to save face (Goffman 1959) by correcting their mistake before he confronted them directly. He commented on his technique:

If it's a credit card and they don't leave a tip on there, I'll just be like: "Oh, did you want to leave



a tip on the credit card?" Because, I know some people don't realize they can leave a tip on their card. Or if they're purposefully trying to get away without tipping me then it gives them an out to make it seem like they're still a nice person. So they'll say: "Oh yeah! I totally forgot! Where do I put it on here? How do I do it?" I think when you give people that kind of space to "get out" without being blatantly rude and still make them seem like a nice person, I think you get more out of it.

As Travis underlined, Jake's drivers accepted and often reminded one another that some customers were not aware of tipping etiquette. Reflecting on this, Seth mused to me and three other drivers: "It was tough to ask for a while but then I realized that a lot of these kids are freshman who just moved away from home and don't really know the tip rules." Such talk served to further justify obtrusive tip solicitation because it provided a valuable lesson to customers rather than significant harm (Lyman and Scott 1970).

Recognizing that some customers were unfamiliar with tipping, drivers attempted to teach them. However, their efforts were tinged by shaming. They applied significant pressure on customers by informing them of the norm of tipping among Jake's clientele. Philip reflected:

The rule of thumb is that anything under a dollar and I tell people: "Hey, people usually like to tip at least a dollar." If someone says: "Keep the change" and it's like seventy-five cents, I say: "Would you like to leave a tip with that?" Then they're like: "Yeah that is your tip" so I'm like: "People generally leave at least a dollar. It averages around two. It did cost me more than this to start up my car and bring your food over here so it would be nice if you returned the favor. It's generally a nice gesture." Then the person is like: "Oh! I didn't know about that!" Then they'll give you a couple bucks and next time they might do the same thing without any hassle [pause] they won't be on the no-tipping train anymore.

Philip's comment highlights a common source of pride and justification for this type of confrontation

among the drivers: it eased subsequent deliveries for other drivers. Additionally, the drivers' recurrent practice of verbally drawing a connection between the customer's tip and the financial burden they incurred to deliver the service functioned to justify their manipulative methods and to redefine the gratuity as a service fee rather than a "free gift" (Douglas 1990; Laidlaw 2000; Schweingruber and Berns 2003) that customers seemed unwilling to bestow.

### Conclusions

Successful drivers know the roads, know people, and know the building blocks of self-presentation. They have quick eyes, social acumen, and a repertoire of fronts at the ready as the customer's door opens and the next potential donor is revealed. Through subtle voice inflections, muted shifts in posture, practiced smiles, rehearsed phrases, and well-worn costumes, the delivery drivers in this study actively managed customers. Working together, they developed a culture founded on economic need and manipulation that allowed them to guide customer comportment. Once overcoming the shame implicated in breaching the silence surrounding tipping, the drivers employed a mixture of inner- and outer-directed emotion management techniques ranging from smiling to screaming in order to make ends meet.

As young, college-educated, white men, Jake's delivery drivers had among the strongest status shields (Hochschild 1983) of any demographic in the service sector. The drivers' social power enhanced their ability to set and command the interactional stage and draw customers unwittingly into their gratuity theater performances. The drivers' social position afforded them the authority to set the stage and cast the roles for the one act play of calzone delivery. Because of their demographic status, the drivers were able to freely wipe away the service worker "gloss" (Goffman 1972, 125) and engage in coercion and shaming without significant rebuke from customers. It is conceivable that these two manipulative approaches are only



accessible to individuals of such high status, particularly given that such active use of intimidation is significantly more acceptable among men than women. With social power comes interactional dominance and amnesty from retribution. When the drivers' attempts to curry favor with customers failed, they chose to dominate the interaction through aggression and intimidation.

In the rare cases in which a driver's status shield did not safeguard him from customer reprisal, he benefited from secondary defenses innate with the structure of Jake's, its product, and the customer population. First, as an independent business owner with the bottom line ever in mind, the proprietor of Jake's possessed and wielded the power to turn a deaf ear to customer complaints. This allowed him to tacitly bolster his drivers' tip wrangling and the increased tips that it often yielded. In doing so, he kept the burden of compensating his workers on the customer rather than himself. Second, the Jake's owner also had the ability to "cut-off" customers who persisted in protesting over their treatment by the delivery crew. He blacklisted dissenters with enough frequency for much of the clientele to be wary of raising a fuss. Also, in a university town with dramatic annual population turnover, his brand of customer service was significantly less detrimental to the popularity of Jake's than if he had attempted to run his restaurant in the same fashion in a small, stable, suburban community. Third, the Jake's calzone was a truly desired product and cultural staple among the student population, particularly during and after weekend partying. This had an additional moderating effect on customer aggravation. . . .

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### Reflective Questions

1. Why are tips so important to delivery drivers? What unremitted costs do drivers incur? What happens if they don't make enough in tips or their car breaks down?
2. Why don't drivers simply ask for tips, if they are so important? What rules of social engagement would be broken by doing so? What emotions do delivery exchanges evoke in drivers, and how do they deal with them?
3. How do drivers adapt their presentation of self in order to build affinity with customers? How did they adjust their interactional style to compel customers to tip?
4. What happened when customers stiffed the drivers? How did drivers manipulate customers to ensure they paid up? What did Goffman mean by "saving face"? What did drivers do to allow customers to save face? Did those driver tactics also elicit tips? Devising ways to ensure customers tip was a collective effort—how so? What role did the boss play in drivers' approaches to eliciting tips?
5. Thompson argues that drivers drew on their "status shield" to control interactions with customers. What is a status shield, and what did it allow these

deliverers to do that other service workers couldn't? When we think of service work, we often think of fast-food cashiers or servers at a sit-down restaurant. But service work includes professional or semi-professional workers, as well: doctors, insurance agents. What benefits in interaction do status shields afford them?

6. The gig economy, where workers are freelancers who contract out their services to companies on a temporary basis, poses challenges to worker-customer and worker-boss interactions. How so? How can workers push back against being exploited?
7. What is the worst job at which you have worked? What made it so bad? Have you worked in a service industry? What did you do? What do many companies do to standardize service experiences? Why? What are the consequences of standardization and routinization for employees? What happens when routinized service exchanges break down? Watch David Letterman work at a drive-thru (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtPGdOs7zOM>) or The Ellen Show's "Ellen in Your Ear" clips where she directs celebrities to interact with service employees (e.g., Dennis Quaid <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g59GrPrt6CQ>, Bruno Mars <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km-ZnxwQhmk>). How are service exchanges organized, and how do we know how to navigate them in the first place? What happens when service interactions break down? How do others try to wrangle us back in? What makes these interactions prank-worthy or funny?





## The Politics of Social Reality

One of the central themes of this volume is that people inhabit socially constructed realities. Through interaction with one another, we endow the world of brute, physical facts with meaning and create symbolic universes that transcend that world. We interpret and structure our subjective experience in terms of social symbols and meanings. Thus, our reality is socially shaped and decided.

However, people's definitions of their subjective or bodily experiences, themselves, others, social situations, their society and its past, and their surrounding environment do not always coincide. When such definitional contests occur, power usually decides whose definitions will prevail. In our society, for example, the medical profession's authoritative definitions of illness commonly prevail over the Christian Scientists' definitions, and psychiatrists' definitions of subjective experience prevail over their patients'. The politics of reality decide who will participate in the social construction of reality, how they will participate, and how much they can contribute.

The more familiar form of politics also involves contested definitions of reality: The social problems we urge policymakers to address are particular constructions of reality. Individuals and groups make different claims about what social



conditions are problems, what kind of problems they are, and how they should be addressed. History, too, is a product of the politics of reality. The past that is transmitted to us is never an unfiltered report of events but involves selection and interpretation. Different views of the past vie to decide what events and historical figures will be remembered and how they will be remembered. Which view of the past prevails depends on the power and influence of their proponents at the time—upon the politics of reality.

The selections in this section examine various aspects of the politics of social reality and their consequences. Most notably:

- *The social construction of reality is a political process, infused with attributions of morality.* No act or person is in itself “normal,” and nothing in itself is “abnormal” or “deviant.” In fact, as we saw with the revision of the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), normalcy changes over time as a matter of shifting group standards, interpretations, and expectations. “Normalcy,” furthermore, often involves moral characterization so that people or acts which follow the rules are considered “good,” while those that do not are “bad.” What makes behaviors or characteristics deviant, then, is that the group considers them to be and reacts to them as undesirable. Deviance is relative, and a process. This is true even of acts which may seem inherently evil on the surface, such as killing someone. People collectively construct killing as acceptable in particular instances: as a sacrifice to the gods, an act of self-defense, a way to ease suffering, or a heroic act during war, for example.
- *Some individuals and groups have greater influence on the construction of reality than others.* The construction of reality is a social process, involving creating particular standards for thinking or acting and then enforcing them. Gatekeepers with legitimized authority (e.g., professors) or in positions of power (e.g., administrators) often create rules for action. They define rules and then convince others of the standards by modeling for them, persuading them, or pressuring them. Also, they are able to enforce the rules by ensuring that the stakes are high for following them. If people do not fall in line, they risk losing ease of interaction, social approval, meaningful identities, and even their safety. Really powerful people (e.g., college presidents) enlist other people to enforce the rules for them (e.g., campus security guards).
- *Social labels are so powerful that they can become the lens through which others interact with us.* Social labeling involves identifying someone and a label, assessing their fit, and applying the label in interaction. As we see with



Amir Marvasti's analysis of being Middle Eastern American after 9/11, some social labels are so meaningful in interaction that they supersede all other labels. The label becomes the lens through which the person's identity and actions are interpreted. In other words, some labels are particularly sticky and hard to shake—so much so that people often come to think of themselves through them and act accordingly. They may end up associating with others with the identity, too, because others avoid them or socially exclude them.

- *We attach resources to particular social labels so people distance themselves from some while actively seeking out others.* We frequently assess people's warmth, competence, and morality in relation to the labels we give them. Thus, we view people on the wrong side of a social divide or who act in particular ways as cold, incompetent, or immoral. In turn, people may try to avoid these assessments by passing as some other kind of person, normalizing their behavior, or separating their actions in one area of life from another. Oftentimes, normalizing one's actions involves connoting one's behavior or way of thinking to larger, more accepted narratives. Sharmila Rudrappa and Caitlyn Collins in Selection 38, for example, show us how people arranging international surrogacy draw on broader Western understandings of liberation to convince parents that women benefit from carrying the baby.
- *Finally, what seems self-evident on the surface is often subject to the politics of social reality upon closer examination.* We are constantly engaging in reality politics with others, whether we realize it or not. These politics may come to the forefront of our awareness during times of crisis, such as when a loved one is murdered, or when we view an act as unjust. Then, we may conscientiously try to challenge how others interpret the situation, just as the families of murder victims do. But even when we are not thinking about the politics of reality, we are engaging in them.

The readings in this final part of the book demonstrate that the politics of reality are the most fundamental politics of human social life. They decide what reality everyone in a given social circle will inhabit and, in some cases, whether they will live at all.



## The Moral Career of the Mental Patient

ERVING GOFFMAN

*The politics of social reality are perhaps most obvious in mental hospitals. Yet students of social life paid little attention to the political struggles of reality construction in mental hospitals before the publication of Goffman's widely read study *Asylums*. They simply assumed the perspective of mental health professionals and did not take seriously their patients' often clashing views of reality. Goffman took a different tack. He attempted to learn about the social life of a mental hospital from the perspective of its patients. This selection, taken from *Asylums*, reveals the politics of reality at that hospital and how they shaped patients' moral careers.*

*What is at stake in the politics of reality that brings individuals to a mental hospital and keeps them there is their very definition of self. In this selection, Goffman reports that family members, friends, and mental health professionals commonly form a political coalition against patients even before they get to the mental hospital. Once there, the patients' past lives and current circumstances are interpreted so as to justify admittance. From that point forward, patients' definitions of self are hostages to the definitional power of the institution and its staff.*

*Like those outside the walls of the mental hospital, patients attempt to maintain "face" or effective claims to positive social value. Yet their very presence in the institution indicates that they have fallen from*

*social grace. As Goffman observes, the mental hospital is a mirror that continually reflects unflattering self-images to patients. Although patients attempt to counter these mortifying definitions of self with what Goffman calls "sad tales," they are challenged by everything around them and by everyone in the hospital. Their misdeeds are recorded in case records, reported at staff meetings, and discussed informally. Patients' own presentations of self cannot counter the weight of information that the hospital's staff possesses about them. They consequently have little influence over how others define and treat them. In the politics of reality of the mental institution, patients are virtually powerless.*

*The goal of the mental institution and its staff is to convince patients to internalize the psychiatric view of reality and themselves. Yet, as Goffman observes, the constant assaults upon patients' definitions of self may have a quite different effect, at least temporarily. Unable to claim or maintain face, patients may conclude that they have nothing to lose by acting shamelessly and do so. Thus, the very institution that is supposed to entice deviant individuals back to the official social reality may sometimes drive them further away. Therein lies a more general sociological lesson. Those who have no power to wield over the politics of reality may simply choose not to participate.*

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In 1955–56, I did a year's field work at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Washington, D.C., a federal institution of somewhat over 7000 inmates that draws three quarters of its patients from the District of Columbia. . . . My immediate object in doing field work at St. Elizabeth's was to try to learn about the social world of the hospital inmate, as this world is subjectively experienced by him. . . .

It was then and still is my belief that any group of persons—prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients—develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it, and that a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject. . . .

The world view of a group functions to sustain its members and expectedly provides them with a self-justifying definition of their own situation and a prejudiced view of non-members, in this case, doctors, nurses, attendants, and relatives. To describe the patient's situation faithfully is necessarily to present a partisan view. (For this last bias, I partly excuse myself by arguing that the imbalance is at least on the right side of the scale, since almost all professional literature on mental patients is written from the point of view of the psychiatrist, and he, socially speaking, is on the other side). . . .

Traditionally the term *career* has been reserved for those who expect to enjoy the rises laid out within a respectable profession. The term is coming to be used, however, in a broadened sense to refer to any social strand of any person's course through life. The perspective of natural history is taken: unique outcomes are neglected in favor of such changes over time as are basic and common to the members of a social category, although occurring independently to each of them. Such a career is not a thing that can be brilliant or disappointing; it can no more be a success than a failure. In this light, I want to consider the mental patient. . . .

The category "mental patient" itself will be understood in one strictly sociological sense. In this perspective, the psychiatric view of a person

becomes significant only insofar as this view itself alters his social fate—an alteration which seems to become fundamental in our society when, and only when, the person is put through the process of hospitalization. I, therefore, exclude certain neighboring categories: the undiscovered candidates who would be judged "sick" by psychiatric standards but who never come to be viewed as such by themselves or others, although they may cause everyone a great deal of trouble; the office patient whom a psychiatrist feels he can handle with drugs or shock on the outside; the mental client who engages in psychotherapeutic relationships. And I include anyone, however robust in temperament, who somehow gets caught up in the heavy machinery of mental-hospital servicing. In this way, the effects of being treated as a mental patient can be kept quite distant from the effects upon a person's life of traits a clinician would view as psychopathological. . . .

The career of the mental patient falls popularly and naturalistically into three main phases: the period prior to entering the hospital, which I shall call the prepatient phase; the period in the hospital, the inpatient phase; the period after discharge from the hospital, should this occur, namely, the ex-patient phase. This paper will deal only with the first two phases. . . .

### The Prepatient Phase

The prepatient's career may be seen in terms of an extrusory model; he starts out with relationships and rights, and ends up, at the beginning of his hospital stay, with hardly any of either. The moral aspects of this career, then, typically begin with the experience of abandonment, disloyalty, and embitterment. This is the case even though to others it may be obvious that he was in need of treatment, and even though in the hospital he may soon come to agree. . . .

In the prepatient's progress from home to the hospital, he may participate as a third person in what he may come to experience as a kind of alienative coalition. His next-of-relation presses him



into coming to "talk things over" with a medical practitioner, an office psychiatrist, or some other counselor. Disinclination on his part may be met by threatening him with desertion, disownment, or other legal action, or by stressing the joint and exploratory nature of the interview. But typically the next-of-relation will have set the interview up, in the sense of selecting the professional, arranging for time, telling the professional something about the case, and so on. This move effectively tends to establish the next-of-relation as the responsible person to whom pertinent findings can be divulged, while effectively establishing the other as the patient. The prepatient often goes to the interview with the understanding that he is going as an equal of someone who is so bound together with him that a third person could not come between them in fundamental matters; this, after all, is one way in which close relationships are defined in our society. Upon arrival at the office, the prepatient suddenly finds that he and his next-of-relation have not been accorded the same roles, and apparently that a prior understanding between the professional and the next-of-relation has been put in operation against him. In the extreme but common case, the professional first sees the prepatient alone, in the role of examiner and diagnostician, and then sees the next-of-relation alone, in the role of adviser, while carefully avoiding talking things over seriously with them both together. And even in those non-consultative cases where public officials must forcibly extract a person from a family that wants to tolerate him, the next-of-relation is likely to be induced to "go along" with the official action, so that even here the prepatient may feel that an alienative coalition has been formed against him. . . .

The final point I want to consider about the prepatient's moral career is its peculiarly retroactive character. Until a person actually arrives at the hospital, there usually seems no way of knowing for sure that he is destined to do so, given the determinative role of career contingencies. And, until the point of hospitalization is reached, he or

others may not conceive of him as a person who is becoming a mental patient. However, since he will be held against his will in the hospital, his next-of-relation and the hospital staff will be in great need of a rationale for the hardships they are sponsoring. The medical elements of the staff will also need evidence that they are still in the trade they were trained for. These problems are eased, no doubt unintentionally, by the case-history construction that is placed on the patient's past life, this having the effect of demonstrating that all along he had been becoming sick, that he finally became very sick, and that if he had not been hospitalized much worse things would have happened to him—all of which, of course, may be true. Incidentally, if the patient wants to make sense out of his stay in the hospital, and, as already suggested, keep alive the possibility of once again conceiving of his next-of-relation as a decent, well-meaning person, then he, too, will have reason to believe some of this psychiatric work-up of his past. . . .

### The Inpatient Phase

The last step in the prepatient's career can involve his realization—justified or not—that he has been deserted by society and turned out of relationships by those closest to him. Interestingly enough, the patient, especially a first admission, may manage to keep himself from coming to the end of this trail, even though, in fact, he is now in a locked mental-hospital ward. On entering the hospital, he may very strongly feel the desire not to be known to anyone as a person who could possibly be reduced to these present circumstances, or as a person who conducted himself in the way he did prior to commitment. Consequently, he may avoid talking to anyone, may stay by himself when possible, and may even be "out of contact" or "manic" so as to avoid ratifying any interaction that presses a politely reciprocal role upon him and opens him up to what he has become in the eyes of others. When the next-of-relation makes an effort to visit, he may be rejected by mutism, or by the patient's refusal to enter the visiting room, these strategies sometimes



suggesting that the patient still clings to a remnant of relatedness to those who made up his past, and is protecting this remnant from the final destructiveness of dealing with the new people that they have become. . . .

Once the prepatient begins to settle down, the main outlines of his fate tend to follow those of a whole class of segregated establishments—jails, concentration camps, monasteries, work camps, and so on—in which the inmate spends the whole round of life on the grounds, and marches through his regimented day in the immediate company of a group of persons of his own institutional status.

Like the neophyte in many of these total institutions, the new inpatient finds himself cleanly stripped of many of his accustomed affirmations, satisfactions, and defenses, and is subjected to a rather full set of mortifying experiences: restriction of free movement, communal living, diffuse authority of a whole echelon of people, and so on. Here one begins to learn about the limited extent to which a conception of oneself can be sustained when the usual setting of supports for it are suddenly removed. . . .

Once lodged on a given ward, the patient is firmly instructed that the restrictions and deprivations he encounters are not due to such blind forces as tradition or economy—and hence dissociable from self—but are intentional parts of his treatment, part of his need at the time, and, therefore, an expression of the state that his self has fallen to. Having every reason to initiate requests for better conditions, he is told that when the staff feel he is “able to manage” or will be “comfortable with” a higher ward level, then appropriate action will be taken. In short, assignment to a given ward is presented not as a reward or punishment, but as an expression of his general level of social functioning, his status as a person. Given the fact that the worst ward levels provide a round of life that inpatients with organic brain damage can easily manage, and that these quite limited human beings are present to prove it, one can appreciate some of the mirroring effects of the hospital.

The ward system, then, is an extreme instance of how the physical facts of an establishment can be explicitly employed to frame the conception a person takes of himself. In addition, the official psychiatric mandate of mental hospitals gives rise to even more direct, even more blatant, attacks upon the inmate’s view of himself. The more “medical” and the more progressive a mental hospital is—the more it attempts to be therapeutic and not merely custodial—the more he may be confronted by high-ranking staff arguing that his past has been a failure, that the cause of this has been within himself, that his attitude to life is wrong, and that if he wants to be a person he will have to change his way of dealing with people and his conceptions of himself. Often the moral value of these verbal assaults will be brought home to him by requiring him to practice taking this psychiatric view of himself in arranged confessional periods, whether in private sessions or group psychotherapy.

Now a general point may be made about the moral career of inpatients which has bearing on many moral careers. Given the stage that any person has reached in a career, one typically finds that he constructs an image of his life course—past, present, and future—which selects, abstracts, and distorts in such a way as to provide him with a view of himself that he can usefully expound in current situations. Quite generally, the person’s line concerning self defensively brings him into appropriate alignment with the basic values of his society, and so may be called an apologia. If the person can manage to present a view of his current situation which shows the operation of favorable personal qualities in the past and a favorable destiny awaiting him, it may be called a success story. If the facts of a person’s past and present are extremely dismal, then about the best he can do is to show that he is not responsible for what has become of him, and the term “sad tale” is appropriate. Interestingly enough, the more the person’s past forces him out of apparent alignment with central moral values, the more often he seems compelled to tell his sad tale in any company in which he finds himself. Perhaps the



party responds to the need he feels in others of not having their sense of proper life courses affronted. In any case, it is among convicts, "winos," and prostitutes that one seems to obtain sad tales the most readily. It is the vicissitudes of the mental patient's sad tale that I want to consider now.

In the mental hospital, the setting and the house rules press home to the patient that he is, after all, a mental case who has suffered some kind of social collapse on the outside, having failed in some overall way, and that here he is of little social weight, being hardly capable of acting like a full-fledged person at all. These humiliations are likely to be most keenly felt by middle-class patients, since their previous condition of life little immunizes them against such affronts, but all patients feel some downgrading. Just as any normal member of his outside subculture would do, the patient often responds to this situation by attempting to assert a sad tale proving that he is not "sick," that the "little trouble" he did get into was really somebody else's fault, that his past life course had some honor and rectitude, and that the hospital is, therefore, unjust in forcing the status of mental patient upon him. This self-respecting tendency is heavily institutionalized within the patient society where opening social contacts typically involve the participants' volunteering information about their current ward location and length of stay so far, but not the reasons for their stay—such interaction being conducted in the manner of small talk on the outside. With greater familiarity, each patient usually volunteers relatively acceptable reasons for his hospitalization, at the same time accepting without open, immediate question the lines offered by other patients. Such stories as the following are given and overtly accepted:

I was going to night school to get a M.A. degree, and holding down a job in addition, and the load got too much for me.

The others here are sick mentally, but I'm suffering from a bad nervous system and that is what is giving me these phobias.

I got here by mistake because of a diabetes diagnosis, and I'll leave in a couple of days. [The patient had been in seven weeks.]

I failed as a child, and later with my wife I reached out for dependency.

My trouble is that I can't work. That's what I'm in for. I had two jobs with a good home and all the money I wanted.

The patient sometimes reinforces these stories by an optimistic definition of his occupational status. A man who managed to obtain an audition as a radio announcer styles himself a radio announcer; another who worked for some months as a copy boy and was then given a job as a reporter on a large trade journal, but fired after three weeks, defines himself as a reporter.

A whole social role in the patient community may be constructed on the basis of these reciprocally sustained fictions. For these face-to-face niceties tend to be qualified by behind-the-back gossip that comes only a degree closer to the "objective" facts. Here, of course, one can see a classic social function of informal networks of equals: they serve as one another's audience for self-supporting tales—tales that are somewhat more solid than pure fantasy and somewhat thinner than the facts.

But the patient's apologia is called forth in a unique setting, for few settings could be so destructive of self-stories except, of course, those stories already constructed along psychiatric lines. And this destructiveness rests on more than the official sheet of paper which attests that the patient is of unsound mind, a danger to himself and others—an attestation, incidentally, which seems to cut deeply into the patient's pride, and into the possibility of his having any.

Certainly, the degrading conditions of the hospital setting belie many of the self-stories that are presented by patients, and the very fact of being in the mental hospital is evidence against these tales. And, of course, there is not always sufficient patient solidarity to prevent patient discrediting patient,



just as there is not always a sufficient number of "professionalized" attendants to prevent attendant discrediting patient. As one patient informant repeatedly suggested to a fellow patient:

If you're so smart, how come you got your ass in here?

The mental-hospital setting, however, is more treacherous still. Staff have much to gain through discrediting of the patient's story—whatever the felt reason for such discrediting. If the custodial faction in the hospital is to succeed in managing his daily round without complaint or trouble from him, then it will prove useful to be able to point out to him that the claims about himself upon which he rationalizes his demands are false, that he is not what he is claiming to be, and that in fact he is a failure as a person. If the psychiatric faction is to impress upon him its views about his personal make-up, then they must be able to show in detail how their version of his past and their version of his character hold up much better than his own. If both the custodial and psychiatric factions are to get him to co-operate in the various psychiatric treatments, then it will prove useful to disabuse him of his view of their purposes, and cause him to appreciate that they know what they are doing, and are doing what is best for him. In brief, the difficulties caused by a patient are closely tied to his version of what has been happening to him, and if co-operation is to be secured, it helps if this version is discredited. The patient must "insightfully" come to take, or affect to take, the hospital's view of himself.

The staff also have ideal means—in addition to the mirroring effect of the setting—for denying the inmate's rationalizations. Current psychiatric doctrine defines mental disorder as something that can have its roots in the patient's earliest years, show its signs throughout the course of his life, and invade almost every sector of his current activity. No segment of his past or present need be defined, then, as beyond the jurisdiction and mandate of psychiatric assessment. Mental hospitals bureaucratically institutionalize this extremely wide mandate by

formally basing their treatment of the patient upon his diagnosis and hence upon the psychiatric view of his past.

The case record is an important expression of this mandate. This dossier is apparently not regularly used, however, to record occasions when the patient showed capacity to cope honorably and effectively with difficult life situations. Nor is the case record typically used to provide a rough average or sampling of his past conduct. One of its purposes is to show the ways in which the patient is "sick" and the reasons why it was right to commit him and is right currently to keep him committed; and this is done by extracting from his whole life course a list of those incidents that have or might have had "symptomatic" significance. The misadventures of his parents or siblings that might suggest a "taint" may be cited. Early acts in which the patient appeared to have shown bad judgment or emotional disturbance will be recorded. Occasions when he acted in a way which the layman would consider immoral, sexually perverted, weak-willed, childish, ill-considered, impulsive, and crazy may be described. Misbehaviors which someone saw as the last straw, as cause for immediate action, are likely to be reported in detail. In addition, the record will describe his state on arrival at the hospital—and this is not likely to be a time of tranquility and ease for him. The record may also report the false line taken by the patient in answering embarrassing questions, showing him as someone who makes claims that are obviously contrary to the facts:

Claims she lives with oldest daughter or with sisters only when sick and in need of care; otherwise with husband, he himself says not for twelve years.

Contrary to the reports from the personnel, he says he no longer bangs on the floor or cries in the morning.

... conceals fact that she had her organs removed, claims she is still menstruating.

At first, she denied having had premarital sexual experience; but when asked about Jim, she said



she had forgotten about it 'cause it had been unpleasant.

Where contrary facts are not known by the recorder, their presence is often left scrupulously an open question:

The patient denied any heterosexual experiences, nor could one trick her into admitting that she had ever been pregnant or into any kind of sexual indulgence, denying masturbation as well.

Even with considerable pressure, she was unwilling to engage in any projection of paranoid mechanisms.

No psychotic content could be elicited at this time.

And, if in no more factual way, discrediting statements often appear in descriptions given of the patient's general social manner in the hospital:

When interviewed, he was bland, apparently self-assured, and sprinkles high-sounding generalizations freely throughout his verbal productions.

Armed with a rather neat appearance and natty little Hitlerian mustache, this 45-year-old man, who has spent the last five or more years of his life in the hospital, is making a very successful adjustment living within the role of a rather gay liver and jim-dandy type of fellow who is not only quite superior to his fellow patients in intellectual respects, but who is also quite a man with women. His speech is sprayed with many multi-syllabled words which he generally uses in good context, but if he talks long enough on any subject it soon becomes apparent that he is so completely lost in this verbal diarrhea as to make what he says almost completely worthless.

The events recorded in the case history are, then, just the sort that a layman would consider scandalous, defamatory, and discrediting. I think it is fair to say that all levels of mental-hospital staff fail, in general, to deal with this material with the moral neutrality claimed for medical statements and psychiatric diagnosis, but instead participate, by

intonation and gesture, if by no other means, in the lay reaction to these acts. This will occur in staff-patient encounters as well as in staff encounters at which no patient is present.

In some mental hospitals, access to the case record is technically restricted to medical and higher nursing levels, but even here, informal access or relayed information is often available to lower-staff levels. In addition, ward personnel are felt to have a right to know those aspects of the patient's past conduct which, embedded in the reputation he develops, purportedly make it possible to manage him with greater benefit to himself and less risk to others. Further, all staff levels typically have access to the nursing notes kept on the ward, which chart the daily course of each patient's disease, and hence his conduct, providing for the near present the sort of information the case record supplies for his past. . . .

The formal and informal patterns of communication linking staff members tend to amplify the disclosive work done by the case record. A discreditable act that the patient performs during one part of the day's routine in one part of the hospital community is likely to be reported back to those who supervise other areas of his life where he implicitly takes that stand that he is not the sort of person who could act that way.

Of significance here, as in some other social establishments, is the increasingly common practice of all-level staff conferences, where staff air their views of patients and develop collective agreement concerning the line that the patient is trying to take and the line that should be taken to him. A patient who develops a "personal" relation with an attendant, or manages to make an attendant anxious by eloquent and persistent accusations of malpractice, can be put back into his place by means of the staff meeting, where the attendant is given warning or assurance that the patient is "sick." Since the differential image of himself that a person usually meets from those of various levels around him comes here to be unified behind the scenes into a common approach, the patient may find himself faced with a



kind of collusion against him—albeit one sincerely thought to be for his own ultimate welfare.

In addition, the formal transfer of the patient from one ward or service to another is likely to be accompanied by an informal description of his characteristics, this being felt to facilitate the work of the employee who is newly responsible for him.

Finally, at the most informal of levels, the lunch-time and coffee-break small talk of staff often turns upon the latest doings of the patient, the gossip level of any social establishment being here intensified by the assumption that everything about him is in some way the proper business of the hospital employee. Theoretically, there seems to be no reason why such gossip should not build up the subject instead of tear him down, unless one claims that talk about those not present will always tend to be critical in order to maintain the integrity and prestige of the circle in which the talking occurs. And so, even when the impulse of the speakers seems kindly and generous, the implication of their talk is typically that the patient is not a complete person. For example, a conscientious group therapist, sympathetic with patients, once admitted to his coffee companions:

I've had about three group disrupters, one man in particular—a lawyer [*sotto voce*] James Wilson—very bright—who just made things miserable for me, but I would always tell him to get on the stage and do something. Well, I was getting desperate and then I bumped into his therapist, who said that right now behind the man's bluff and front he needed the group very much and that it probably meant more to him than anything else he was getting out of the hospital—he just needed the support. Well, that made me feel altogether different about him. He's out now.

In general, then, mental hospitals systematically provide for circulation about each patient the kind of information that the patient is likely to try to hide. And, in various degrees of detail, this information is used daily to puncture his claims. At the admission and diagnostic conferences, he

will be asked questions to which he must give wrong answers in order to maintain his self-respect, and then the true answer may be shot back at him. An attendant whom he tells a version of his past and his reason for being in the hospital may smile disbelievingly, or say, "That's not the way I heard it," in line with the practical psychiatry of bringing the patient down to reality. When he accosts a physician or nurse on the ward and presents his claims for more privileges or for discharge, this may be countered by a question which he cannot answer truthfully, without calling up a time in his past when he acted disgracefully. When he gives his view of his situation during group psychotherapy, the therapist, taking the role of interrogator, may attempt to disabuse him of his face-saving interpretations and encourage an interpretation suggesting that it is he himself who is to blame and who must change. When he claims to staff or fellow patients that he is well and has never been really sick, someone may give him graphic details of how, only one month ago, he was prancing around like a girl, or claiming that he was God, or declining to talk or eat, or putting gum in his hair.

Each time the staff deflates that patient's claims, his sense of what a person ought to be and the rules of peer-group social intercourse press him to reconstruct his stories; and each time he does this, the custodial and psychiatric interests of the staff may lead them to discredit these tales again. . . .

Learning to live under conditions of imminent exposure and wide fluctuation in regard, with little control over the granting or withholding of this regard, is an important step in the socialization of the patient, a step that tells something important about what it is like to be an inmate in a mental hospital. Having one's past mistakes and present progress under constant moral review seems to make for a special adaptation consisting of a less than moral attitude to ego ideals. One's shortcomings and successes become too central and fluctuating an issue in life to allow the usual commitment of concern for other persons' views



of them. It is not very practicable to try to sustain solid claims about oneself. The inmate tends to learn that degradations and reconstructions of the self need not be given too much weight, at the same time learning that staff and inmates are ready to view an inflation or deflation of a self with some indifference. He learns that a defensible picture of self can be seen as something outside oneself that can be constructed, lost, and rebuilt, all with great speed and some equanimity. He learns about the viability of taking up a standpoint—and hence a self—that is outside the one which the hospital can give and take away from him.

The setting, then, seems to engender a kind of cosmopolitan sophistication, a kind of civic apathy. In this unserious yet oddly exaggerated moral context, building up a self or having it destroyed becomes something of a shameless game, and learning to view this process as a game seems to make for some demoralization, the game being such a fundamental one. In the hospital, then, the inmate can learn that the self is not a fortress, but rather a small open city; he can become weary of having to show pleasure when held by troops of his own, and weary of having to show displeasure when held by the enemy. Once he learns what it is like to be defined by society as not having a viable self, this threatening definition—the threat that helps attach people to the self society accords them—is weakened. . . .

In the usual cycle of adult socialization, one expects to find alienation and mortification followed by a new set of beliefs about the world and a new way of conceiving of selves. In the case of the mental-hospital patient, this rebirth does sometimes occur, taking the form of a strong belief in the psychiatric perspective, or, briefly at least, a devotion to the social cause of better treatment for mental patients. The moral career of the mental patient has unique interest, however; it can illustrate the possibility that, in casting off the raiments of the old self—or in having this cover torn away—the person need not seek a new robe and a new audience before which to cower. Instead he can learn,

at least for a time, to practice before all groups the amoral arts of shamelessness.

### Reflective Questions

1. What does the category "mental patient" mean in a sociological sense? What are the stages of the patient's career? Why do patients experience a "downgrading" upon entering a mental hospital?
2. What various "self-stories" do patients tell? What are "sad tales" and how do patients end up telling them? How do patients use different stories to paint particular versions of themselves? What role does the hospital setting play in breaking down particular self-stories?
3. Do hospital staff depict patients' behavior neutrally? How do staff meetings help staffers to discredit patients? How else do they organize hospitals to facilitate discrediting patients?
4. Watch an episode of A&E's *Intervention* (at <http://www.aetv.com/intervention/index.jsp>) and compare the prepatient phase here to the one described by Goffman. Who set up the intervention, and how do family and friends construct the history of the target to the interventionists and television audience? Closely examine the interactions of all the players during the intervention itself and consider how they negotiate the politics of definition. How do different players (family, friends, interventionists, target) define reality and what tools do they use to convince each other (and you) that their version is more legitimate than that of the other players? How do family and friends try to convince the target that he or she has "fallen" and needs to change his or her attitude, interactions with others, and conception of the self? Do they discredit and break down the target so that he or she eventually accepts their version of reality? How? What role does the setting of the intervention play? What social and personal resources do targets use to resist? What are the bases of power in these interactions? What happens when targets are powerless?
5. We organize institutions in ways that delegitimize the claims, identities, and behaviors of particular people. What tools do people in positions of power use to discredit others within universities? Prisons? Religious institutions? The military?



## Being Middle Eastern American in the Context of the War on Terror

AMIR MARVASTI

*In Selection 36, Erving Goffman describes how life in a mental hospital was designed to break down patients' existing views of themselves and to encourage their internalization of a psychiatric view of reality and themselves. It also highlights how mental patients are relatively powerless to protect themselves from the constant assaults that are directed toward their definitions of self. In turn, they may choose to act shamelessly and to stop defending their cherished self-images. Outside institutions such as a mental hospital, however, individuals typically have more power to shield themselves against critical or unflattering social appraisals. Thus, they are likely to draw upon a variety of defensive interactional strategies that can enable them to avoid stigma and preserve a valued sense of self.*

*In the aftermath of the attacks that took place in the United States on September 11, 2001, Middle Eastern Americans suddenly found themselves in a new and profoundly different social context. Within this context, they became targets of hostility, suspicion, and social stigma and, as a result, were subjected to insults, harassment, and demeaning or unequal treatment. Unfortunately, for many Middle Eastern Americans, this experience of ethnically based stigmatization and discrimination has persisted in the landscape of post-9/11 America. In turn, they have had to find ways to address the challenging politics of reality that surround their ethnic status.*

*In this selection, Amir Marvasti explores how Americans of Middle Eastern descent respond to the negative reactions and unflattering self-images directed toward them by others. In doing so, he highlights how they effectively negotiate the politics of identity, especially by actively engaging in attempts to avoid, neutralize, or challenge stigmatizing images of self. Middle Eastern Americans primarily rely on artful strategies of impression management and information control, marked by the use of different types of accounts, for this purpose. These strategies include using humor to divert attention away from stereotypes that would stigmatize them, proactively educating others about Middle Eastern cultures and thereby correcting their inaccurate perceptions, and directly challenging others' stigmatizing attitudes and requiring them to explain those attitudes. In some cases, Middle Eastern Americans also choose to avoid stigma by passing, which involves the careful management of their appearance to conceal their ethnic identity and thereby avoid negative social reactions.*

*As Marvasti illustrates, through employing these creative interactional strategies Middle Eastern Americans find ways to preserve valued identities and a sense of self-worth. Their success in this regard is a tribute to the human spirit and to our ability as individuals to defend our self-conceptions from social evaluations. However, what Marvasti implies, but never explicitly*

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*addresses, is that we, as individuals, need some degree of social support for our self-protective identity work. It is an open question just how long we can resist the influence of social appraisals, especially demeaning ones, without a little help from our friends. Many of the selections in this volume suggest the answer: not very long.*

About a year after September 11, 2001, I was in a shopping mall in a northeastern city. For the last thirty minutes, I had been acutely aware of a security guard who had been following me around the mall. I was not completely surprised to see him follow me into the restroom. I was, however, taken aback when he moved closer to me near the urinal and looked over my shoulder as I was urinating. I was not sure what to say or do. I thought, "Is he worried that I am going to contaminate the city's water supply with my toxic urine?" I felt violated but did not want to cause a scene. So I started singing, "Chances are, 'cause I wear a silly grin the moment you come into view. . . ." I had learned the lyrics from a Taco Bell toy that played the song when you squeezed it. I did not really know the rest of the song, but it did not matter, crowing in English seemed to have done the job. The security guard backed off and left me alone for the rest of my time at the mall.

As this story from my own life shows, September 11th and the ensuing period that has been named "the War on Terror" have significantly changed the daily lives of Middle Eastern Americans. For members of this ethnic group, it was indeed "the day that changed everything." In the days following September 11th, anything seemed possible, even mass detentions on a scale similar to what Japanese Americans were subjected to after Pearl Harbor. Such fears were so real that on the night of September 11th, I actually packed some of my belongings and essential documents in a small suitcase in preparation for mass detentions. I was, after all, born in Iran and physically resembled the terrorists, whose images were relentlessly displayed in all the mass media.

The extreme measures I feared did not materialize in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks; however, our lives have, in many ways, changed for the worse. In particular, Middle Eastern Americans experience more stereotyping more frequently than before. We are asked to explain our intentions, politics, and personal beliefs, even in the course of the mundane routines of everyday life, such as shopping at a mall. Although prejudice and discrimination against this ethnic group existed for decades before September 11th, the recent intensity and regularity of these demands are unprecedented. As one of my respondents put it, it happened before, "but not with this magnitude, and not with the accusatory tone. . . . Before it was just out of curiosity, and it was incidental, but this is an even more demanding tone of 'Who are you? And why did your people do this?'"

In this article, I investigate how Middle Eastern Americans respond to these disruptions of their daily routines. My original intention was to use interview data as well as my personal experiences as an Iranian immigrant to show how Middle Eastern Americans manage the stigma of their "spoiled identities" (Goffman 1963), especially in the aftermath of September 11th. While working on the first draft, I told my Iranian friend Ahmad, with whom I was having lunch, that I was working on a paper titled "Stigma Management Strategies of Middle Eastern Americans." He nodded with his head down as he swallowed his food. After a short pause, he asked: "Why 'stigma?' What is the stigma?"

I was a little surprised that he failed to see the obvious. I explained, "After September 11th, people from the Middle East, especially Muslims, are treated with suspicion and subjected to ethnic profiling. That's why we are stigmatized."

He replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "Not always. Sitting here with you, talking in this school cafeteria, I don't feel stigmatized."

I began to wonder if this was a case of what Marx would call "false consciousness." I tried harder to convince him of the gravity of the situation of Middle Eastern Americans in a post-9/11



world. Ahmad did not disagree with the entire argument, he just refused to see himself as someone with a chronic stigma, or a permanent and enduring negative identity.

My friend convinced me that in some situations the stigma of being Middle Eastern goes unnoticed or is altogether nonexistent for all practical purposes. How do we then empirically study stigma or even know if it actually exists? One way to answer this question is to explore differences or similarities between audience and self-perceptions. In other words, we can compare Ahmad's self-image with his audience's perceptions of him and then go on to make certain conclusions about the relation between the two perspectives. For example, we may find that many people do in fact have negative perceptions of Ahmad, but he is fortunate to enjoy a high self-esteem that shields him from any emotional damage. This line of thinking could tell us a good deal about the mental state of both sides, but it offers less insight into everyday practice, or what people actually do when they interact with one another.

Self or audience perception are not fixed; they change in the course of practice. Similarly, the meaning of "stigma" varies situationally. A friend in graduate school jokingly referred to me as "the swarthy Iranian" (I did not find that funny). My same brown complexion apparently evoked a different audience response when a waitress at a Denny's told me, "You have such a nice tan!" (To which I smugly replied, "I was born with it.")

How do I really feel about having a brown complexion? Well, it depends on how it is used. I cannot really discuss it without referring to specific interactions and the social context that made my skin tone relevant. In the same vein, the empirical reality of being Middle Eastern is not just a mental property of the self or audience, but is enacted under the concrete conditions of everyday life. Audience or self perceptions about stigma become experientially meaningful and accessible when articulated in a specific setting and for a particular purpose.

Thus, to appreciate the complexity of Ahmad's experiences as a Middle Eastern American, it seemed that I needed to attend to situational variations surrounding how individuals define, enact, and cope with stigma in everyday encounters. This article first offers brief discussions of how I conceptualized stigma and everyday practice for the purpose of this study, and then presents my analysis of how Middle Eastern Americans manage their identities in the aftermath of September 11th.

### Stigma and the Management of Spoiled Identity

Numerous studies have highlighted how stigmatized individuals employ various resistance and management strategies in response to negative labels (Cahill and Eggleston 1994; Davis 1961; Evans, Forsyth, and Foreman 2003; Feagin and McKinney 2003; Fothergill 2003; Herman 1993; Karp 1992; Riessman 2000; Roschelle and Kaufman 2004; Snow and Anderson 1987). This body of research treats normal-deviant interactions as an ongoing drama in which the stigmatized try to create positive identities. As they reveal, individuals use various techniques, such as humor and selective disclosure, to either avoid being stigmatized or soften the impact of the stigma on their "spoiled identity."

Much of the scholarship cited above is inspired by Goffman's seminal work *Stigma* (1963), in which he states:

[When a stranger] is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others. . . . He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma. (Pp. 2–3)

For Goffman, stigma is a variable social construct and not a fixed characteristic of the person. Stigma is bound by social roles and expectations and derives its meaning from particular social contexts. An ascribed status or attribute, such as one's race or ethnicity, is not inherently stigmatizing, but becomes so under a specific set of social rules and



social conditions. For example, a number of studies have suggested that recent demographic and sociopolitical trends in North America may gradually lower the rank of whiteness from a preferred racial status to a social stigma (Killian 1985; Kusow 2004; Storrs 1999).

Furthermore, as Link and Phelan's work (2001) notes, stigma is a multifaceted concept. Accordingly, studies of stigma can be classified on the basis of which aspect of the stigmatization process they emphasize. In this article, I am most interested in the "obtrusiveness" of stigma (Goffman 1963:129) and its "disruption" of daily routines (Harvey 2001). Specifically, I focus on encounters that become "incidents" or "scenes" (Goffman 1959: 210–12). In such situations, as the norms of "audience tact" and "disattention" are suspended, the stigmatized individuals find themselves caught in the interactional spotlight, forced to explain themselves to others. From the perspective of the stigmatized, these disruptions are especially significant for their "moral careers"—or how they judge themselves and others over time (Goffman 1962: 128). As one respondent put it, in such moments "the thin veneer of civility" is stripped away and negative labels are openly applied and contested.

We can view these instances of identity dispute as occasions for eliciting and producing "accounts." I borrow this term from Lyman and Scott (1989) to refer to encounters in which a person is called to "explain unanticipated or untoward behavior—whether that behavior is his or her own or that of others, and whether the approximate cause of the statement arises from the actor himself or someone else" (p. 112). Thus, we give accounts when confronting an unusual situation or individual. In their discussion of stigma, Evans, Forsyth, and Foreman (2003) note that "understanding the way individuals use accounts to construct positive self-identities, in the face of occupying a stigmatized . . . position, is indeed important turf for social science" (p. 373).

This article examines stigma-related accounts as performances that involve both the substance

of everyday experience (i.e., *what* is being contested or questioned and under *what* conditions) and the social construction of reality (i.e., *how* it is presented). This view of stigma is consistent with the symbolic interactionist premise that objects are not inherently meaningful; rather, individuals assign meanings in general, and identities in particular, through interaction. Stigma is realized in the reflexive interplay between social conditions and self-presentation. The meaning and practical significance of stigma is interactionally achieved in everyday encounters. To better highlight this reflexive approach to accounts and stigma, the next section discusses interpretive practice as an analytic framework that attends to both the substance of stigma and its dramaturgical management.

### Interpretive Practice and Accounting

"Interpretive practice," as developed by Gubrium and Holstein (2000), provides a view of lived experience that is faithful to both individual agency and structural conditions. On the one hand, its emphasis on artful practice echoes the interactionist dictum of "if [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572). That is to say, reality is socially constructed through symbolic interaction. On the other hand, an interpretive practice approach has affinities with the Marxist notion that people "make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past" (McLellan 2000: 329). Approaching social interaction as interpretive practice implies that actors are neither completely passive nor autonomous. Instead, interpretive practice focuses on social life as it is empirically manifested in the interplay between artful construction and concrete circumstance. Indeed, Gubrium and Holstein caution against placing too much emphasis on either the conditions or artfulness of everyday practice. In their words, "Being the two sides of interpretive practice, conditions



and artfulness are reflexively intertwined so that the reification of one in service to the analysis of the other is virtually impossible" (1997: 121).

Following this approach, stigmatizing encounters involve both concrete realities and fluid practices in which actors use language to settle identity disputes. In this sense, stigma becomes a locally-circumscribed achievement. Applying these insights to Middle Eastern Americans' encounters with those who question their identities, specific cultural resources (i.e., racist stereotypes and fear of terrorism perpetuated by the media) provide the social context for inquiries about Middle Eastern people. However, the outcomes of these encounters are never predetermined; each is an occasion for negotiating the practical meaning of Middle Eastern American identity. Each is replete with its own nuances and artful practices.

### Social Context and History

Accounts are conditioned by structural factors. As Lyman and Scott point out (1989), there are patterned differences between those actors who request accounts and those who have to account for themselves. In their words,

The point with respect to accounts is their right to be requested, their establishment of social identity, and their efficacy to change in accordance with the changing status of the group involved. . . . Situations of account confusion are especially acute when a group in transition from one status position to another is undergoing a collective identity crisis. Racial groups provide numerous examples. Before the 1920s some Japanese in America insisted on their identity as "free white persons" in order to circumvent naturalization and franchise barriers, but found few others would accept this definition of their racial status. (P. 151)

In many ways, the case of Middle Eastern Americans is similar to that of Japanese Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. Political turmoil in the Middle East and terrorism have created an identity crisis for those with ancestral ties to that

part of the world. The negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern Americans ("Arabs" in particular) predate the September 11th tragedies. For example,

An ABC News poll, conducted during the Persian Gulf crisis in February 1991, found 43% of Americans had a high opinion of Arabs while 41% said they had a low opinion. In that poll, majorities of Americans said the following terms applied to Arabs: "religious" (81%), "terrorists" (81%), "violent" (58%) and "religious fanatics" (56%). (Jones 2001: 1)

In fact, negative opinions toward Middle Eastern Americans date back at least to the hostage crisis of 1972 in which Palestinian militants took eleven Israeli athletes hostage during the Olympic Games in Munich. The German authorities' attempt to rescue the hostages ended in a massacre that claimed the lives of all eleven hostages and five of the eight terrorists. Shortly after this event, the Federal Bureau of Investigation launched one of its first national campaigns to interview and deport Arab Americans (Marvasti and McKinney 2004: 56). Later, the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, the first Gulf War in 1991, and the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center all reinforced negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern Americans. Each conflict was followed by a wave of hate crimes and discrimination. Mosques were vandalized, and people were fired from jobs and assaulted on the streets (Feagin and Feagin 2003: 327–30; Marvasti and McKinney 2004: 53–60; Schaefer 2006: 299–302; U.S. Congress 1986).

These backlashes were relatively isolated and episodic until September 11, 2001, when systematic discrimination against Middle Eastern Americans received considerable public support. A *Newsweek* poll conducted shortly after the terrorist attacks, on September 14–15, 2001, indicated that "32% of Americans think Arabs living in this country should be put under special surveillance as Japanese Americans were" (Jones 2001: 3–4). Similarly, in June 2002 a Gallup survey of 1,360 American adults showed that "of the five immigrant groups



tested [Arabs, Hispanics, Asians, Africans, and Europeans], the public is least accepting of Arab immigrants, as 54% say there are too many entering the United States" (Jones 2002: 3).

Since September 11, 2001, accountability has become an everyday reality for Middle Eastern Americans in light of official policies that systematically demand that they explain their every action. Former Attorney General John Ashcroft articulated this state of heightened awareness quite clearly in public addresses by suggesting that if suspected terrorists as much as spit on the sidewalk, they would be arrested (Gorman 2002). The term "suspected terrorists" has become so broadly defined as to include thousands of Middle Eastern men who have been interviewed, arrested, or deported for minor immigration violations.

Interestingly, under U.S. immigration laws, Middle Eastern Americans (officially defined as those with ancestral ties to a region stretching from Turkey to North Africa) are classified as "white." Indeed, most affirmative action forms specifically instruct people of Middle Eastern descent to identify themselves as "white." However, the phrase "Middle Eastern-looking" almost always used in connection with a terrorist threat, has come to connote the same meaning as the words "black suspect." Their official classification as "white" seems to have no practical relevance in everyday life as Middle Eastern Americans are singled out for antiterrorism measures.

In the post-9/11 era, "Middle Eastern-looking" people, men in particular, have been verbally harassed, physically attacked, and sometimes killed, regardless of their actual nationality or association with Islam or the Middle East. In Mesa, Arizona, an Indian Sikh was shot and killed for being dark-skinned, bearded, and wearing a turban (Delves 2001). The man responsible for this crime also fired shots at a Lebanese gas station worker and an Afghan family. In addition to the rash of indiscriminate violence, in several incidents across the country "Middle Eastern-looking" men were removed from flights after completing all security

checks and being seated (Brown 2001). The reason offered in most cases was as vague as the crew not feeling safe flying with them.

Furthermore, the current terror warning system, which is intended to alert the public about potential terrorist attacks, acts as an accounting catalyst. As the level of terror is "elevated," for example, from yellow to orange, public fears and suspicions are equally increased, and subsequently more Middle Eastern people are forced into the position of account-givers. At the same time, terror warnings call on ordinary citizens to be "alert" and report anything "suspicious"—in a sense, deputizing them as semiofficial account-takers. In essence, the terror alert system encourages the suspension of tact and disattention, especially to the detriment of "Middle Eastern-looking" people. To borrow from Goffman (1963), Middle Eastern Americans are suffering "ill-fame" perpetuated by the mass media. In his words, their "public image . . . seems to be constituted from a small selection of facts which . . . are inflated into dramatic news-worthy appearance, and then used as a full picture [of their identity]" (p. 71). Under these circumstances, aspects of one's life that would ordinarily be considered private are routinely subjected to public and official scrutiny in everyday encounters.

However, the outcomes of such encounters are not uniform or predetermined. As Goffman states (1963), and Gubrium and Holstein develop in relation to interpretive practice (2000), stigma is not the property of a person, but of relationships that always unfold through symbolic interaction. Building on these insights, the stigma of being Middle Eastern American is not external to interactions but is constructed or rejected *through* interaction, accounts, and self-presentational strategies.

### Methods and Data

From May 2002 to May 2004, my wife (a white woman from the southern United States) and I conducted twenty in-depth interviews with twelve male and eight female respondents, whose age ranged from eighteen to fifty-five years. All were



either enrolled in college or had earned a four-year degree (at minimum), and lived in three different states (Florida, Pennsylvania, and Virginia). Eighteen were naturalized citizens and two were longtime immigrants who had lived and worked in the United States for over ten years and planned to become citizens. In our interviews, we asked respondents how they managed being Middle Eastern, particularly when facing discrimination. We began our interviews with demographic questions about age, country of origin, and education. We then followed with questions about whether respondents had experienced any form of ethnic discrimination at work, in school, or in their communities because of their religion, names, accents, appearance, or style of dress. We used probes like "What did you do then?" to encourage respondents to elaborate on their narratives. . . .

The interview data was supplemented with autoethnographic data from my experience as an Iranian immigrant who has lived in the United States since 1983. For the purpose of this study, autoethnography refers to an orientation that allows the researcher to use her or his experiences as data in the form of a cultural insider's personal narratives (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Hayano 1979; Ronai 1992).

I represent my own and my respondents' accounting for stigma in narrative form to highlight the contextual and existential quality of these experiences. Because the stories I analyze here are reconstructions of normal deviant encounters, they are subject to retrospective distortions. Having said that, retrospective accounts of accounts have been the primary source of data in many studies of stigma management. Encounter narratives are the norm in the sociology of stigma for both practical and theoretical reasons. Practically, it is difficult to position oneself as a researcher to observe stigma management firsthand. Researchers would have to shadow the stigmatized through their daily routines to isolate specific stigma-related encounters. Theoretically, a person defines stigmatization experiences largely in retrospect. It is after reflecting on an encounter that a person might say,

"I am/was stigmatized" or "I resist/resisted stigma in this way." Additionally, similarities between my respondents' accounts suggest that their narratives are not random fictions but reflections of a patterned experience.

Middle Eastern individuals presented or accounted for their selves in disrupted social encounters or "incidents" (Goffman 1959: 212). Accounting practices took mainly five forms: humorous accounting, educational accounting, defiant accounting, cowering, and passing. Analyzing these accounting strategies enables us to vividly grasp the interplay between artful self-presentations and obdurate social conditions. Each constitutes a different interpretive practice individuals use to establish a situationally practical and useful Middle-Eastern self.

### Humorous Accounting

When questioned about their ethnic identity, respondents sometimes use humor as a way of shifting attention away from the stereotypes that threaten their identities. In this way, they use humor as a diversion technique (Taub, McLorg, and Fanflik 2004). Consider, for example, how Ali accounted for his Middle Eastern-sounding name.

AM: Do you get any reactions about your name?  
Like people asking you what kind of name is that?

ALI: Sometimes they do; sometimes they don't. Sometimes, if they haven't met me or if they are sending me correspondence, they think it's a lady's name and a lot of correspondence comes in Ms. Ali [last name]. They think I'm either Alison or something like that. Nowadays, when my name comes up [in face-to-face contacts with clients], I use my sense of humor. For example, when they can't spell my name or ask questions about it, I say, "I'm the brother of Muhammad Ali, the boxer."

Ali's deliberate use of associations with the famed boxer places his name in a cultural context his



account-takers are familiar with. In this type of accounting, individuals use humor to establish a common ground or "facilitating normalized role-taking" (Davis 1961: 128).

Another respondent, whose first name, Ladan (the name of a flower in Persian), brings up unwelcome and troubling associations with the notorious terrorist Osama Bin Laden, tells this story about how she used humor with an inquisitive customer.

AM: With the name Ladan, do you run into any problems?

LADAN: Where I work [at a department store] we all wear nametags, with the name Ladan very clearly spelled out L A D A N. And this old couple, they approached me and I was very friendly with them—I usually chitchat with my customers. And he started asking me all these questions like, "You're so pretty, where're you from?" [I respond,] "I'm from Iran." [He says,] "What?" [I repeat,] "I'm from Iran." So he asks, "What's your name?" And I say, "Ladan." So he bent down to read my nametag and he just looked at me with a funny face and asked, "Are you related to Bin Laden?"

AM: Was he joking?

LADAN: No, he was not. But I did joke back to him and I said, "Yes, he's my cousin and actually he's coming over for dinner tonight." [She chuckles.]

AM: So, when this sort of thing happens, you use humor to deal with it?

LADAN: Yeah, I do, because otherwise, if I don't turn it into a joke or a laughing mood, I get upset. I get really, really offended.

AM: So what was this guy's reaction? Did he laugh with you?

LADAN: When this guy realized my name is Ladan and I'm from Iran, he changed his attitude. He became reserved and he even went one step backward. When I noticed he was uncomfortable, I completed the transaction with his wife and let them leave as soon as they wanted.

In this case, Ladan's use of humor does not necessarily result in the proverbial "happy ending," or a clearly discernible resolution. The customer turned away and ended the interaction. Whether Ladan remained stigmatized by this encounter or whether the customer walked away feeling that he successfully applied the stigma is unknown, perhaps even for the participants involved in the interaction. What is clearer is that Ladan's account allowed her to highlight the ludicrousness of the account-taker's assumptions and his right to solicit an account. Here, the way of speaking shapes the substance of the identity. Ladan is not giving a specific and accurate account of who she "really" is, but is using humor to construct an encounter-specific account that implicitly questions the account-taker's right to ask her questions about her identity.

I also use humor to account for my name. The following encounter took place on election day (November 14, 2002) at a voting precinct in a small town in Pennsylvania where I went to cast my vote in the midterm elections. The encounter begins with the examination of my photo identification.

ELECTION SUPERVISOR: Okay . . . this is a hard one! [squinting at my driver's license] You're ready? [alerting her coworker] It says Amar. . . It's A . . .

*I wait, silent and motionless, as the three old women probe my ID. I fear that any sudden movement might send people running out of the building screaming for help. "Speak!" I scream in my head. The words finally roll out of my mouth:*

AM: You know, my dad gave me a long name, hoping that it would guarantee my success in life. [They laugh.]

ELECTION SUPERVISOR: Well, you must be a doctor because you sure sign your name like one.

AM: [I cannot resist] Actually, I am a doctor. . . So maybe my dad had the right idea after all.

In this case, I use humor as a method of introduction, a way of constructing an identity for the occasion that gives more weight to *how* one speaks



rather than *what* one speaks. It was not clear to me what they thought about me, but I sensed that they were still puzzled—I had to account for who I am. The immediate substance of my identity was not in question—they had my photo identification in front of them and most likely could tell from my swarthy appearance that I was not a native Pennsylvanian. Instead, humorous accounting allowed me to shape the broad contours of my identity for the occasion. Namely, I was able to communicate that I come from a “normal” family that aspires to the universal notion of “success in life,” that I am aware that there are concerns about my identity, and am capable of responding to them in a sensible way.

In humorous accounting, the substance of the account is incidental and is deliberately trivialized. The account-giver acknowledges the demands of the encounter while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy and the urgency of the request for an account. How the account-giver handles the substance of the matter shapes the identity in question.

### Educational Accounting

Sometimes accounting takes on a deliberate pedagogical form. In such cases, the account-giver assumes the role of an educator, informing and instructing the account-taker about relevant topics. This strategy of “normalization” (Goffman 1963) combats stigma by correcting stereotypes. Unlike humorous accounting, educational accounting centers on the informational substance of the account.

In response to suspicions and antagonism from his neighbors, a Pakistani Muslim, Hassan, conducted a sort of door-to-door educational accounting:

After September 11th, I walked the street the whole week and talked to every single one of my neighbors. . . . And one of my neighbors—his brother was in Tower Two and he got out, and his mother was there and she was *furious* with Muslims and me. And we were there for three hours, my wife,

my kids, her [the neighbor], her son and her other son that came out of the World Trade Center—he had come down by the time the buildings came down. And I was like, “Look, that’s not Islam. That’s not who Muslims are. Ask your son, what type of person am I? What type of person is my wife? Do I oppress my wife? Do I beat my wife? Have you ever heard me say anything extreme before?” . . . They all know I don’t drink, they all know that I pray five times a day, they all know I fast during the month of Ramadan. At the end of Ramadan, we have a big party and invite everyone over to help celebrate the end of fast. This year, they’ll all probably fast one day with me so they can feel what it’s like.

Hassan’s approach is proactive; it addresses potential questions before they are explicitly asked. In some ways, this form of educational accounting is similar to what Hewitt and Stokes (1975: 1–3) call “disclaimers” or a “prospective construction of meaning” that individuals use in an attempt to avoid being categorized in an undesirable way. In this example, Hassan tries to transform the relationship between him, as an account-giver, and the account-takers who suspect him of being an “evildoer.” Unlike humorous accounting, where account-givers deliberately trivialize cultural stereotypes, educational accounting explicitly and diligently addresses them in order to debunk them.

Account-givers have to give considerable attention to deciding which inquiries are worthy of an educational account. For example, an Iranian respondent, Mitra, indicates that she filters inquiries about her culture and identity before answering them:

If they ask about the government or the senate over there [Iran], I don’t know anything about it. I know who the president is, but they ask me about the senate or the name of the senator over there, I don’t know. Since I don’t know I’m not going to get involved. I’ll say I don’t know or I’m not interested. If they say, “Oh, you are from *that* country!” or “You are from the Middle East and you are a



terrorist," those kinds of comments I'm not going to get into. I'll just say, "No, I'm not." But if they ask me about the culture I'll tell them, "Alright," and inform them about it—as much as I know.

Although inclined to assume the role of an educator, Mitra is unwilling or unprepared to respond to every question. Part of her educational accounting strategy involves evaluating the degree of her expertise on the subject and the tone of the questions. As she says, if the account-taker begins with accusations, such as "you are a terrorist," the only reasonable reply might be to deny the accusation and end the interaction.

Educational accounting was a common strategy for Middle Eastern Muslim women in my sample, especially those who wear the *hijab*. Many of them were approached by strangers who asked questions such as "Isn't it hot under there?" "Does that come in many colors?" "Why do you wear that?" "Are you going to make *them* [referring to the ten- and twelve-year-old girls who were standing in a grocery store line with their mother] wear it too?" These women were literally stopped on the street by strangers who asked questions about the *hijab*, sometimes so directly as to constitute rudeness. My respondents reported that whenever time and circumstances allowed, they provide accounts of their religious practices and beliefs. Some of these answers include "I wear it because it is my culture," "I wear it so that you won't stare at my body when you are talking to me," or a more flip-pant response such as, "It's cooler under my scarf than you think." . . .

#### Defiant Accounting

When prompted to provide an account, Middle Eastern Americans sometimes express righteous indignation. I call this defiant accounting. Similar to humorous accounting, the account-giver exerts agency by challenging the other's right and the rationale to request it. However, whereas humorous accounting entails indirect and fairly conciliatory objections to stigma, in defiant accounting

the stigmatized make explicit demands for counter explanations from the "normals." For example, consider how Alham, a young Iranian woman, describes her experiences with a coworker.

She [the coworker] would tell me, "I don't know which country you come from but in America we do it like this or that." I let it go because I was older than her and we had to work together. . . . But one day I pulled her aside and I told her, "For your information where I come from has a much older culture. And what I know, you can't even imagine. So why don't you go get some more education. And if you mention this thing again—'my country is *this*, your country is *that*'—, I'm going to take it to management and they're going to fire you or they're going to fire me." And that was it.

Alham does not provide an account to repair the interaction or to restore it to a state of equilibrium. On the contrary, she explicitly seeks to challenge the conventional format of the encounter. Instead of aiming for consensus, defiant accounting foregrounds conflicting viewpoints and signals the account-giver's objection to the entire affair. The interaction is explicitly focused on the fairness of the exchange between the account-giver and the account-taker.

Account-givers are especially likely to use defiant strategies when they find the request for an account unfair. Specifically, ethnic minorities who are subjected to profiling may become defiant in response to the practice. For example, when I learned that, unlike myself, my white colleagues were not asked to show ID cards upon entering the campus gym, I felt justified in becoming defiant. In one instance, while pulling out my ID card from my wallet, I asked the woman at the front counter why my white faculty friend, who had just walked in ahead of me, was not asked to present an ID. She explained that she had not noticed the other person entering or she would have asked him to do the same.

This encounter highlights the unpredictability of defiant accounting for both parties involved in



the interaction. At its core, this strategy counters an account request with another: they ask for my ID and I ask why I should be the only one subjected to this rule. In turn, the other side presents its account and so on. This chain of accounts and counter-accounts could result in a formal dispute. Though it is possible that in some cases, when confronted, the account-takers simply back down and cease their efforts, it is just as likely that they intensify their demands, especially when they are backed by policies or other public mandates.

Defiant accounting is a risky approach that can either shield the account-giver from a potentially humiliating process or generate additional requests and demands. In some cases, defiant accounting can become a type of mass resistance, as with African Americans and the passive resistance component of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. . . .

### Passing

The goal of passing (Goffman 1963) is information control and the concealment of stigmatizing attributes from "normals." As an accounting strategy, passing means eliminating the need for an account (see Lyman and Scott 1989: 126–27). How individuals present their identity can potentially eliminate the need for accounting altogether. My respondents accomplished passing by manipulating their appearance. The stereotypical image of a Middle Eastern person roughly translates into someone with dark hair, large facial features, swarthy skin, non-European foreign accent, facial hair on men, and veils and scarves on women. Faced with these stereotypes, some respondents consciously altered their looks to avoid any outside marker that might associate them with these stereotypes. Self-presentation (Goffman 1959), especially attention to clothes and grooming, is an equally important consideration for successful passing. For example, wearing jeans and being clean-shaven draws less attention and leads to fewer occasions for accounting.

Some Middle Eastern Americans try to pass by trading their own ethnic identity for a less controversial one. The simplest way to do this is to move

to an ethnically diverse region. The respondents who live in South Florida stated that one reason they did not experience negative episodes of ethnic accounting is because they are perceived as Hispanic. For example, an Iranian woman was asked what kind of Spanish she was speaking when she was having a conversation with her teenage daughter in Farsi at the mall. Another Iranian man tried to pass as Italian by placing an Italian flag vanity license plate on his car. As a general rule, my respondents displayed Western or patriotic symbols (e.g., an American flag) at work, in front of their homes, or on their cars to avoid ethnic accounting. After September 11th, my neighbors gave me an American flag to place outside my apartment. As he put it, "This is for your own safety." In a sense, patriotic symbols are accounting statements in their own right and act as "disidentifiers" (Goffman 1963: 93) that help separate "loyal Americans" from suspected terrorists.

Another strategy for passing is to give an ambiguous account in response to ethnic identity questions. For example, asked about his country of origin, an Egyptian man stated that he was Coptic (a pre-Islamic Egyptian culture). He noted that uninformed account-takers typically find it too embarrassing to ask follow-up questions, pretend to know what "Coptic" means, and drop the subject altogether. Iranians create this kind of ambiguity by stating that they are Persians (the designation of ancient Iran). Another way to circumvent accounts is to name one's city of birth instead of country of birth. I once told a college classmate that I was from Tehran. To my astonishment, he asked, "Is that near Paris?"

Changing one's name is another way to pass. Some respondents change their Muslim names (e.g., Akbar) to typical American names (e.g., Michael). When asked why he changed his name, Ahmad explained that he was tired of people slamming down the phone when he made inquiries about jobs. Some change from widely known ethnic-sounding names to lesser known ones as in the change from Hossein to Sina.



Passing strategies pose their own risks for the stigmatized. In particular, the media have constructed passing among Middle Eastern Americans as an extension of the "evil terrorist plot." After September 11th, it was widely reported that the hijackers were specifically instructed to wear jeans and shave their faces to pass as native born ethnics. Therefore, rather than being viewed as a sign of cultural assimilation, Middle Eastern Americans' conspicuous attempts at passing can be cast as a diabolical plan to form a "sleeping cell" or to disguise "the wolves among us." These days, when I go to an airport, I am very conscious of how much passing would be considered legitimate. Trying to conceal too much information about oneself can arouse suspicion. In fact, I sometimes wear my gold medallion with its Allah (Arabic for "God") inscription conspicuously on the outside of my shirt to indicate that I am not attempting to "misrepresent" myself or deceive anyone.

### Conclusions: Interpretive Practice and Stigma Management

The interpretive practice model used in this study combines the interactionist concepts of accounts and stigma management with the structural emphasis on concrete social conditions. This analysis focuses on accounting as an interpretive process for establishing situationally specific ethnic identities. Rather than treating stigma as an objective reality, I examine the interpretive practices individuals use to establish or dispute stigma and stigmatized identities.

I reject a more objective conceptualization of stigma in part because, as noted by Riessman (2000), such an approach exaggerates the influence of the dominant culture. Instead of considering the myriad ways would-be targets challenge or altogether dismiss stigma, the objective view takes for granted the reality of stigma and proceeds to analyze its management, concealment, or consequences for the stigmatized. As a result, Goffman's original stipulation on the situationally variable and interactionally embedded nature of

stigma is lost. Lost also is the understanding that, at least according to Goffman (1963), stigma is a tentative reality project. As he states, "The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives. These are generated in social situations during mixed contacts" (p. 138). Therefore, stigma, the stigmatized, and stigmatizers become meaningful within specific social interactions. The assumption that stigmas are obdurate qualities of particular groups of people might contradict empirical evidence, or the actors' own experiences.

The case of Middle Eastern Americans' spoiled identities suggests that two sets of empirical observations have to be incorporated into the analysis. On the one hand, there is the reality of the so-called War on Terror and pervasive fear of terrorism, both of which have made Middle Eastern Americans "legitimate" targets of scrutiny in everyday life. Similarly, the political turmoil in the Middle East directly affects their lives in the United States, so much so that there is almost a direct correspondence between the volatility of the region and the instability of Middle Eastern identities in the United States. Every terrorist attack, every hostage taking, and every virulent speech issued from the Middle East triggers a corresponding wave of public scrutiny in the United States. These are the conditions, but how do we get at everyday practices? How do Middle Eastern Americans cope in real life situations? Answering these questions requires wearing a different analytic hat, so to speak.

One way my respondents and I cope with these conditions is by being adaptable and fluid with our self presentations. We do not enter daily interaction as members of a stigmatized group. Many of us are devout Muslims who practice our religion proudly despite stereotypes and the negative press. To suggest that we are narrowly defined by the stigma of being Middle Eastern is an empirically unfounded claim. It is equally problematic to imply that the majority of Americans are engaged in a mass stigmatization campaign. On a general level, my analysis is informed by the idea that ethnic difference



is variable and interactionally achieved (Garfinkel 1967), and suggests that Middle Eastern Americans use a range of interpretive practices to define their ethnic-national identities in the context of everyday life during the War on the Terror.

My respondents and I experience being forced into positions where we have to account for our ethnic identities. What triggers these accounting encounters (e.g., genuine interest, fear, or malice) is of secondary relevance. As C. Wright Mills (1939) suggests, the motives for these encounters are themselves situated and discerned in the course, and in the language, of the interaction. In these encounters, account-givers and account-takers monitor each other at every turn and respond accordingly. I have labeled this type of interaction *accounting encounters*, and have underlined some of the self-presentation strategies Middle Eastern Americans use as they account for their identity (humorous, educational, and defiant accounting, and passing) . . .

What these accounting strategies share is that they are all attempts at salvaging spoiled identities in disrupted routine interactions. My respondents indicated that they measure the quality of their lives by the number of disruptions they face (i.e., a good day means not receiving unwanted attention). It is true that most people experience some type of "incident" or "scene" in their daily lives, but it is also true that most find "their predicament . . . much less charged and more easily set to rights" (Davis 1961: 132).

In addition to its economic effects, stigma also forces its targets to become excessively and constantly conscious about themselves, others, and social interactions in general (Goffman 1967). A poignant example of this heightened state of consciousness is illustrated in my encounter with another shopper at a Wal-Mart store in Florida.

We were both waiting in a checkout line. The woman, who was momentarily distracted by a tabloid cover, looked up at me abruptly and asked, "Where did you come from?" I hesitated for a second, wondering if I should try to pass as "an

average Floridian," but ethnic pride took a hold of me. So I stuck out my chest and blurted, "I am Iranian." She responded with a perplexed look, "I mean, how'd you get in front of me in this line?" I did not know what to say after that. I just kept my head down, paid for my items, and left the store. I did not look back out of embarrassment.

Although laughable, such encounters could have the unfortunate effect of further alienating and weakening the account-givers' bonds with "normal" society. Ultimately, no accounting strategy is a suitable substitute for social interaction unencumbered by stereotypes and the acts of discrimination they engender.

At a different level, this article also hints at the onerous emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) unwilling account-givers have to perform in order to cope with stigma. I believe that examining stigma as interpretive practice has clear political implications. As Gubrium and Holstein put it, interpretive practice "presents the recognition that we could enact alternate possibilities or alternative directions. . . . If we make visible the constructive fluidity and malleability of social forms, we also reveal a potential for change" (2000: 503). Like most studies of deviance and stigma, my work is intended to humanize myself and my respondents, but beyond that, I hope for social change. By voicing my own and my respondents' perspectives, I want to inspire my readers to initiate new interpretive practices. Ultimately, this article is a purposeful account in its own right that aims to change negative perceptions and hurtful practices.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is a "spoiled identity"? Why don't people with those identities always feel stigmatized? How

is stigma the by-product of social expectations and contexts?

2. What do "scenes" look like and why do they produce "accounts"?
3. What forms of accounting do Middle Eastern Americans engage in and to what effect? How are their accounts influenced by their social contexts?
4. Perhaps you or someone close to you has experienced negative social appraisals related to appearance, ability, or some other characteristic in certain contexts. What circumstances make these appraisals the most likely to occur? Which make them difficult to contest? How do you/they elicit support from family and friends? What kinds? What sort of support most helps you maintain a sense of self-worth? What toll does it take on family and friends?
5. The Internet provides a new venue for individuals to gather resources, craft alternative selves, and gather support after being stigmatized. Go to [dailystrength.org](http://dailystrength.org), the [experienceproject.com](http://experienceproject.com), or an online support group of your choice. Pick a few stigmatized experiences, and then read several exchanges. What interactional approaches do online communities use to foster valued identities and meaningful senses of self in the face of stigmatization? How are they different from the ones described by Marvasti? What sorts of "incidents" do communities most aggressively try to counteract? What happens when no one responds, or they respond in a way that other posters view as unsupportive?



## Altruistic Agencies and Compassionate Consumers: Moral Framing of Transnational Surrogacy

SHARMILA RUDRAPPA AND CAITLYN COLLINS

*Motivation, according to sociologists, is the process of interpreting and anticipating consequences of particular ways of acting. C. Wright Mills (1940: 905) explained, motives "do not denote any elements 'in' individuals." They are not internal drives or intentions which impel people to reach a particular goal or act out a particular value. Rather, Mills argued (p. 907), "Motives are accepted justifications for present, future, or past programs or acts." That is, people provide (or anticipate) explanations for their behavior that others will accept or not, which enables or prevents taking action in a particular circumstance.*

*Likewise, people can compel others' actions—especially to participate in social movements—by engaging in what Goffman (1974) called "framing." Framing is providing ways of defining events and reality. To be effective, actors often engage in "frame alignment," where the frame connects to broader themes or organizational schemes which will resonate with other actors (Snow et al. 1986). Doing so lends credibility to the frame.*

*In this selection, Rudrappa and Collins explore the moral character of framing of international surrogacy. Surrogacy is when a woman gets pregnant and births a baby for someone else. Paying for a gestational surrogate in the United States, the largest market for surrogacy, is very expensive. With low costs, available technology, and favorable regulations, India has*

*emerged as a prime market for surrogacy for First World parents. Transnational surrogacy raises moral questions for people concerned about the exploitation of poor women. Why do the surrogates endure pregnancy and childbirth for a child they won't raise? Are they fully empowered to do so? Are First World families exploiting the women? As the authors show, critical interpretations call surrogacy a "rent-a-womb industry" and "baby factory."*

*Surrogacy agencies cultivate two elaborate moral frames to counteract the labeling of surrogacy as exploitative. Both frames draw on liberation, altruism, and compassion to align themselves with broader Western concerns. First, agencies frame surrogacy as liberating for poor women. Agencies create literature which portrays surrogates as healthy and happy to be helping others and surrogacy as providing a financial bounty that will change women's lives. Agencies limit parents' contact with surrogates—under the guise that surrogates prefer it that way—so they have no accurate information about the women's lives, the toll of surrogacy, or the lack of escaping poverty. Second, surrogacy is framed as a reproductive right for infertile and same-sex couples and single parents. These two moral frameworks convince parents that surrogacy is a "win-win" exchange—so they dismiss their moral concerns if not feel positively about participating in commercial surrogacy.*

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*Framing, thus, is one way we legitimize particular ways of thinking and urge others into action. Connecting these frames to broader, widely agreed upon moral understandings is especially compelling.*

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... Transnational surrogacy in India is variously described in the media as the nation's "rent-a-womb industry" (Bhalla and Thapliyal 2013; Carney 2010; Desai 2012; Vogt 2014), "baby factory" (Dolnick 2007; Jayaraman 2013), "life factory" (Schulz 2008), and the "global market in bargain basement price babies" (Shulevitz 2012). In the face of such criticism, consumers of surrogacy defend their practices. For example, Adrienne Arieff, who had two daughters through an Indian surrogate mother, explains,

This was a win-win, allowing the surrogate to have a brighter future and the couple to have a child. If my money was going to benefit an Indian woman financially for a service she willingly provided, I preferred that it be a poor woman who really needed help because the money that a surrogate earns in India is, to be blunt, life-changing. (Grinberg 2012)...

The case of transnational surrogacy is critical to studying intimate industries because, while other forms of intimacy (sexual exchange and child care, for example) have longer histories of commodification, surrogacy is an emergent intimate industry. Societies at large express anxieties around surrogacy, as evinced in the media portrayal cited earlier, and by scholars who variously describe it as

the "baby business" (Spar 2006), "outsourcing the womb" (Twine 2011), and "wombs in labor" (Pande 2014). Hence we ask: Given that the commercialization of pregnancy and childbirth is cast as morally fraught, how do the various actors account for their engagement in surrogacy? What moral frames constitute transnational surrogacy?

This article is based on a triangulation of in-depth interviews with eight infertility specialists, 20 intended parents, and 70 surrogate mothers in Bangalore, India, as well as blogs and media stories. We posit that transnational surrogacy as an intimate industry unfolds within a discrete reproductive landscape, or "reproscape" (Inhorn 2011). This reproscape, we reveal, relies on particular moral frames that justify market actors' participation in this newly emergent and highly unequal reproductive exchange. That intimate industries are structured along the contours of gendered/racialized international divisions of labor is established (Boris and Parreñas 2010; Briggs 2010; Colen 1995; Parreñas 2001). We show that precisely because of these inequalities, surrogacy agencies and intended parents reproduce narratives of compassionate feelings and acts of altruism, which frame transnational surrogacy and lead to its growth and sustenance as a global business. To unpack why transnational surrogacy raises an inordinate amount of public curiosity and approbation, we first describe surrogacy in India as a form of intimate industry (Parreñas, Thai, and Silvey, 2016) to contextualize the moral frames that shape various agents' engagements with it.

### Transnational Surrogacy in India

Surrogacy is a medically, legally, and market-mediated process by which a woman of prime fertility age gets pregnant and births a child for a client parent or parents. Clients seek surrogacy arrangements either because one or both partners are biologically infertile. Or, gay men who want to father and nurture children enter into surrogacy arrangements. The most common form of surrogacy prevalent today is gestational, commercial



surrogacy, wherein the human ova and sperm are legally owned by a couple or individual, and as a result they also exercise legal rights over the embryos prepared from these sex cells. The couple or individual can be the source of those sex cells, or they can purchase them from sperm or egg banks. The ova are fertilized in vitro and transferred to the surrogate mother's body three to five days after fertilization. The surrogate mother has no genetic relationship to the baby she gestates and births, which in some countries, such as India, translates to little or no parental rights over the resultant child. She receives wages from the intended couple for having delivered "their" baby, which signals the end of the social relationship between her, the baby, and the clients. Gestational surrogacy thus involves a multitude of bodies in making a single baby. Often, there are multiple mothers and fathers—the biological mother and father who provide the ova and sperm, the birth mother who labors to produce the baby, and the social mother(s) and father(s) who nurture and raise that baby.

For much of in vitro fertilization's short market history, the United States was the leading provider of surrogacy services in the world (Ikemoto 2009; Lee 2009; Ragone 1998). In 2009, assisted reproductive technologies comprised an annual business of \$4 billion in the United States alone (Rapp 2009). But surrogacy in the United States is very expensive with an estimated \$80,000–120,000 price tag, and lower-cost surrogacy options have cropped up elsewhere. For example, Russia and Slovenia tap into markets in France, Italy, or the Netherlands. Also, some countries have made commercial surrogacy illegal, necessitating reproductive tourism for those who want to use surrogates to have children (Lee 2009).

It is within this context of global surrogacy that India has emerged as an infertility tourism hotspot. Ova can be procured from white women in the Republic of Georgia or South Africa if parents desire racially white children, sperm can be shipped from the United States, and surrogate mothers from India can all be brought together to make babies

at some of the lowest costs for intended parents anywhere in the world (Rudrappa 2010). With the medical expertise in place, the facilitation of global trade through the General Agreement in Trade in Services, the availability of inexpensive drugs and cheap labor, weak regulatory apparatus, and the commercialization of surrogacy in 2002, India is the "mother destination" (Rudrappa 2010). More than 200 infertility clinics are registered with the National Association for Assisted Reproduction in India, although estimates range from 500 to 3,000 clinics in operation. The surrogacy business earns more than \$400 million a year in India (Bhalla and Thapliyal 2013; Pratap 2011). Currently, surrogacy in India is available only for heterosexual couples because the country banned access to these services to gay couples and single individuals in 2012 (Sarma 2012).

### Global Intimate Labor, Reproscapes, and Stratified Reproduction

Surrogacy in India is a form of intimate labor, which is defined as the paid employment involved in forging, maintaining, and managing interpersonal ties through tending to the bodily needs and wants of care recipients (Boris and Parreñas 2010). . . .

Building from here, we posit transnational surrogacy as an intimate industry that entails a bureaucratized movement of hundreds of thousands of individuals who crisscross the globe in pursuit of fertility assistance, human eggs, and sperm. Anthropologist Marcia Inhorn observes that these movements occur within discrete spaces, which she calls reproductive landscapes or "reproscapes." Specifically, reproscapes are "a distinct geography traversed by global flows of reproductive actors, technologies, body parts, money, and reproductive imaginaries" (Inhorn 2011, 90). These reproscapes, Inhorn notes, are sustained by Third World women who are willing to undergo risky forms of hormonal stimulation, egg harvesting, and high-risk pregnancies in order to assist privileged others, including First World clients, in meeting their reproductive goals.



... In her study of surrogacy in India, anthropologist Daisy Deomampo (2013a) notes that though clients and surrogate mothers have differential access to agency and power, and though infertility specialists treat surrogate mothers as no more than “wombs-for-rent,” the women themselves struggle to participate in globalized reproductive work on “the best terms they can muster” (Deomampo 2013b, 184). Thus, even when disempowered, women workers marshal the emotional wherewithal required to endure and participate in transnational surrogacy on terms they find acceptable. ... [S]urrogate mothers and intended mothers perceive their relationship as gift-giving between global sisters (Pande 2011). That is, surrogate mothers cast their reproductive labor as gifts to infertile women from the West in order to make the latter’s desires for children possible. And, intended parents describe their economic transactions as a rescue mission because their payments assisted Indian surrogate mothers in raising their “own” children by providing cash for better schools, homes, and luxury items. ...

Used extensively in social movements literature, we find the concept of moral frames useful to explain how firms and consumers signify their actions. Frames are schemes of interpretation that enable actors “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” events in their social worlds (Goffman 1974, 21). Not only do individuals make sense of their worlds through frames, which are modes of interpretation, but also, these moral frames legitimize their actions to others, thereby attempting to garner social sanction rather than disapproval. Framing “denotes an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction. ... [I]t is contentious in the sense that it involves the generation of interpretive frames that not only differ from existing ones but that may also challenge them” (Benford and Snow 2000, 614).

Thus, various accounts might perceive surrogacy as exploitative, but firms and intended parents

cast their market engagements directed at building their families in morally sanctified ways. ...

## Methods

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight heterosexual and 12 gay individuals/couples availing of infertility services in Mumbai, Anand, and Delhi in 2011–2012. All these families reside in the United States and Australia (pseudonyms are used for all clients). The gay couples, all men, had gone to India before 2012 when the ban against gay couples and single parents was instituted. ... More than half of our interviewees (12 couples) were recruited through the blogs we read about their surrogacy experiences in India; these online blogs have been critical sources of information because parents consider them “public diaries”—they consciously fashion themselves in particular ways as they present their story to the world. ...

The rest of our intended parent interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling from the blogger intended parent interviewees. We contacted respondents via email about their interest in participating and interviewed everyone who replied affirmatively. Interviews lasted from 90 minutes to three hours in person, on Skype, or by telephone. ...

We also interviewed eight infertility specialists in the southern Indian cities of Bangalore and Hyderabad. We supplement these interviews with print media stories published in India, the United States, Canada, and Germany, because these stories are based on interviews with the most popular infertility doctors in India. In addition, we use websites and blogs maintained by infertility agencies in India in order to gather information on how they morally frame their businesses.

Finally, our analysis is complemented by findings from a larger research project based on interviews with 70 women in Bangalore. Most of these women had already served as surrogate mothers, or were pregnant and housed in surrogacy dormitories at the



time of the interviews. Nineteen of the women had either failed attempts at surrogacy and were back on the agency's roster as potential surrogate mothers, or they were undergoing hormonal infusions but had not as yet undergone embryo transfer. . . .

### **Casting Commercial Surrogacy as Reproduction Justice Medical Interventions**

Prior to describing the moral frames agencies and clients used to understand surrogacy, it is crucial to outline the specifics of surrogacy in India, and the kinds of medical interventions performed on women's bodies in order to prepare them for surrogacy. . . . Failure rates in surrogacy are very high. Infertility specialists can increase the odds by using younger women's eggs and healthy sperm, and implanting embryos in women who are at ideal fertility age. Yet, even these measures do not guarantee a pregnancy, let alone a successful birth. Our interviewees explained that in order to increase the chance of live births, infertility specialists in India routinely hired two surrogate mothers for each client they worked with. Each woman, upon being hormonally stimulated for pregnancy, was implanted with four embryos each. The women then underwent what doctors and clients euphemistically referred to as "fetal reduction" procedures to achieve an "optimal birth outcome," which was one to two viable fetuses per surrogate mother. Infertility doctors and clients, and *not* the surrogate mothers, decided on optimal birth outcomes. In some cases, among the individuals we interviewed, client parents went back home with two to three children borne by two different surrogate mothers.

Interviews with surrogate mothers in Bangalore revealed that medical disclosure and informed consent were absent; none of the surrogate mother interviewees had received information regarding the kinds of medical interventions they would eventually undergo. Neither had they received information on health risks involved in repeated

hormonal hyper-stimulation. Many women were unaware they would probably deliver through Cesarean surgery at weeks 36 to 38 of gestation. Even though almost all of them had delivered their own children vaginally, a majority of the surrogate mother interviewees underwent Cesarean surgeries. Finally, none of the surrogate mother interviewees had received postnatal care from the agencies that hired them. . . .

### **Mediating the Relationship between Surrogate Mothers and Client Parents**

Surrogacy agencies actively control the images of the surrogate mothers that circulate in popular media, and among clients: First, the agencies *all* speak about how well they treat surrogate mothers, and how happy the women are to be of service to others. Second, surrogate mothers are characterized as generous yet desperately poor individuals who are good mothers. Third, they are also depicted as shy, sensitive, and secretive about their choice, eager to return back to their own families, and unwilling or unable to speak with clients, researchers, or journalists. Western clients are especially seen as clueless because they ostensibly do not understand the cultural nuances involved in communicating with "traditional" Indian women. As a result, agencies insist that direct communication with surrogate mothers is an unwanted hardship imposed on the women. To ease the discomfort the surrogate mothers feel in talking with "strangers," the agencies insist that their staff must mediate all contact with surrogate mothers. Thus, agencies shape conversations between surrogate mothers and clients.

Many surrogacy agencies maintain websites with pictures of smiling, pregnant surrogate mothers and infants. These websites feature information about why Indian women pursue surrogacy, the rigorous psychological and medical testing they undergo, and how their lives are improved by



becoming a surrogate mother. A prominent agency, Surrogacy Centre India, says of the mothers on its website:

It takes a generous and loving woman to act as a surrogate mother for an infertile couple. . . . SCI Healthcare's surrogate mothers give up more than one year of their lives for our program. They are women with big hearts, who feel deeply for our clients and the pain they have endured trying to become parents. . . . SCI Healthcare's surrogate mothers are well paid and well cared for, both physically and emotionally. The excellent healthcare, family support and monetary compensation is the least we can offer our surrogates for the amazing gift they give—the gift of life! Our surrogate mothers feel immense pride and satisfaction in being able to help our clients become families.

An Australian couple, Scott and James, said that their biggest concern before pursuing overseas surrogacy was the treatment of the surrogate mothers. They flew to India and toured a surrogacy dormitory and hospital, and the firm's administrator assured them the women lived in comfortable conditions and received excellent medical care and healthy food. Based on this assurance, they decided to begin the surrogacy process on that trip.

However, many respondents complained that they had no direct contact with the mothers. They recounted the difficulties they encountered in accessing information about the well-being of the surrogate mother(s) during the pregnancy, which for them was a major downside to pursuing transnational surrogacy; agency employees provided them only with brief, vague updates. Several respondents said that their agencies claimed surrogate mothers were uncomfortable having their photo taken and were unwilling to Skype with them. Some clients were prohibited from meeting the mothers during pregnancies, and met with them only after childbirth in the presence of agency staff. In spite of specifically noting the difficulties in accessing information, respondents believed that the Indian women were happy during their

dormitory residencies, and received an unparalleled level of care in better conditions than in their family homes. One couple, Colin and Phil, went to Delhi to retrieve the infants from the agency after two surrogate mothers had recently given birth to them. They ran into one of the mothers at the hospital, they said, and were touched by "how happy and smiling she was." She was a "spitfire"—she had the biggest smile." Colin did not answer us directly when we asked him if they spent time with or spoke with her; he replied instead that the women were "eager to get back to their village before Diwali, eager to get back to their children." He paused and then reflected,

They did it for the money, they both did. They both lived in housing that we ultimately paid for. That was the first time they had ever had electricity, or a fridge. They had their meals prepared for them, had people cleaning their homes, and giving them vitamins. . . . In some ways, they received superior prenatal care over the average person in the U.S. during their pregnancy.

Thus, it is not just "under western eyes," but Indian surrogacy agencies and infertility doctors, too, produce the "'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject" (Mohanty 1984, 333) that authorizes particular kinds of discourses to circulate about working-class Indian women, which then sanctions specific political and economic interventions. Maintaining distance between surrogate mothers and parents-to-be facilitates the agency's ability to shape interactions in carefully scripted ways that preserve the image of the agency, surrogate mother, and clients. They posit an image of working-class Indian women as poor mothers who are victims of their culture, dependent on men in their families, and inextricably tied to their familial and kinship networks. And, agencies claim that women's eight- to nine-month stays in the surrogacy agency dormitories are luxurious interludes because they come from such abject conditions. These tropes, then, allow clients to understand themselves as moral social actors who



do not exploit surrogate mothers; instead, clients ease the latter's entry into better lives. While we are in no way suggesting that consumers are gullible, we note that these frames remove the anxiety surrounding the exchange of money for babies, and allow surrogacy agencies and clients to understand themselves as kindhearted actors with generous intentions.

### **"I Don't Want to Consider It Exploitation": The Moral Framing of Transnational Surrogacy**

Quinn and Antonio, a gay couple in their late thirties and forties who lived in Los Angeles, were expecting twins through a surrogate mother in Delhi. Antonio, who is a high school teacher, said he weighed the question of exploitation, but ultimately decided that this was a mutually beneficial transaction:

I was afraid that Indian women were being subjected to some sort of exploitation. And then I realized I fell into my own trap: thinking these women are less empowered to make their own decisions for themselves. They are intelligent—they can make the decision that they can get this money to help their kids or start a new business or buy a new house or whatever—so I don't consider it exploitation. *I don't want to consider it exploitation* (our emphasis).

Every parent we interviewed said they were glad to have used surrogacy services in India for its ability to empower Indian mothers. From our data, we discerned two distinct emergent moral frames:

1. Surrogacy facilitates Indian women's access to wage labor, which liberates them from patriarchal social control.
2. Surrogacy furthers reproductive rights for infertile individuals as well as working-class Indian mothers who are better able to provide for their own children.

We draw from our interviews, popular media stories, and agency websites to reveal how infertility

specialists, surrogacy firms, and client parents framed transnational surrogacy as inherently liberatory, and as furthering reproductive rights for all families. The two frames overlap, but we address them as distinctive "imaginaries" to provide thicker descriptions of each.

1. *Surrogacy liberates and empowers working-class Indian women.* Our interview with Dr. Sulochana Gunasheela embodied this perspective. Dr. Gunasheela was a prominent Bangalore infertility specialist who, in 2005, served as a member on the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) committee that drafted the National Guidelines for Accreditation, Supervision, and Regulation of ART Clinics in India, which forms the basis for surrogacy contracts and the country's current ART Bill. Dr. Gunasheela believed that cases of "altruistic surrogacy" in India, where women did not receive monetary compensation for surrogacy, tended to be exploitative. She said that upper-middle-class families felt entitled to working-class women's bodies and labor, and the surrogate mothers had little recourse in avoiding demands on their reproductive abilities, especially if their extended families had a long history of dependent interactions with employers or wealthier relatives. Many clients assumed that they had already assisted these "altruistic" surrogate mothers by paying for their children's education, or providing the women or their husbands with employment. Commercial surrogacy, according to Dr. Gunasheela, circumvents exploitative relations because the surrogate mother receives a salary for her work in producing that baby, which she can then use to potentially negotiate a powerful position for herself within her own household. Dr. Gunasheela spoke of workers as being empowered by commercial surrogacy because it removed exploitative, hierarchical notions of gift exchange exemplified in altruistic, noncommercial surrogacy arrangements.

Quinn explained, "The way I think about it is, the going rate in the States for a surrogate is \$20,000, and in India they get \$8,000. It's a life-changing thing there. Here, you may be help somebody pay



off their credit cards, but there, you may be helping them move into the middle class or something," Quinn elaborated that an American surrogate mother probably has an annual salary of \$40,000 or less, so earning \$20,000 for surrogacy is about half her annual income. In comparison, he said, an Indian woman makes three or four times her annual income by being a surrogate mother. For this reason, Quinn explained that his money is potentially more meaningful to an Indian woman than an American woman.

Another couple who initially worried about the moral implications of surrogacy were Colin and Phil, who live in New York and now have three children via two Indian surrogate mothers. They explained:

The argument I tried to make at the time is that if we had a surrogate in the U.S. and paid all this money, and the surrogates are paid \$25,000—tell me what that does to anyone in the U.S. They pay tax on it. It doesn't fundamentally change their lives. It's probably a nice windfall of cash, but that's it.

In India, though, Colin guessed that the women received between \$4,000 and \$5,000 for being a surrogate mother. "This fundamentally changes their lives. It's the equivalent of maybe five years of income—it has enabled them to move into a home, to get an education for their children." Colin argued that people who are "unfamiliar with the extreme poverty in India" don't realize that "there are a whole lot of winners here. No one was hurt." Addressing their detractors, Colin asked, "What have you ever done to make the lives of these women better? You are so quick to judge me, but I have. I can point to two people who have homes and have sent their kids to school as a result of our direct involvement with them."

Like the couples cited here, many of the intended parents were unable to pinpoint how much surrogate mothers earned, but believed that women earned three to five times their annual income, which then transitioned them out of poverty. In

addition, they spoke of how surrogacy expanded reproductive rights for clients and surrogate mothers.

2. *Surrogacy furthers reproductive rights.* Reproductive rights encompass the plethora of policies that strengthen reproductive decision making, including choice of marriage partners, family formation, determination of the number, timing, and spacing of one's children, and the right to information and means needed to exercise voluntary choice in reproduction. Various activists and scholars tie reproductive rights to basic human rights especially because children are seen as essential to individuals' access to adulthood and financial security in resource-poor countries. In addition, infertility is acknowledged to be a psychologically and socially devastating medical diagnosis, with women being more stigmatized than their male partners even when the latter are diagnosed with infertility. Therefore, the lack of fertility assistance is seen as a human rights violation (Deech 2003). Various scholars endorse wider availability of assisted reproductive technologies, given that infertility is far more prevalent in resource-poor countries and among the indigent (Greenhalgh 1995; Unisa 1999). Gay rights advocates in the global North too make the connection between basic human rights and gay parents' rights to birth children and raise them in queer families. Placed in this context, comparatively inexpensive surrogacy in India can be seen as widening access to reproductive rights because surrogacy is now an option for those individuals who may have been priced out of the market.

Our respondents expressed an overwhelming sense of joy and validation that their struggles to become parents—their inalienable reproductive rights—had a market solution. Many interviewees recounted emotive anecdotes about first hearing of Indian surrogacy on the radio, reading online articles, or catching a news clip on television. Beth and Cory, for example, are in their early forties and living in Melbourne, and had come to terms with the fact that they would never have children because of Beth's infertility since age 24. In 2011, Beth saw a news segment on Australian television about



a gay couple who went to India for surrogacy; she said she wept with happiness, realizing that their 20 years of childless married life now had a potentially happy ending.

In addition to achieving the reproductive rights of infertile couples, surrogacy in India is also cast as furthering the reproductive rights of working-class women because surrogacy enables them to improve their children's life opportunities. Dr. Nayna Patel of Akanksha Infertility Clinic in Anand, Gujarat, who has appeared in diverse media outlets like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, BBC, CNN, *Der Spiegel*, PBS, *Forbes*, and *The Nation*, elaborates:

There is this one woman who desperately needs a baby and cannot have her own child without the help of a surrogate. And at the other end there is this woman who badly wants to help her [own] family. . . . If this female wants to help the other one why not allow that? It's not for any bad cause. They're helping one another to have a new life in this world. (Dolnick 2007)

Patel holds the same perspective five years later: "There is nothing immoral or wrong in this. A woman is helping another woman, one who does not have the capacity to have a baby and the other who lacks the capacity to lead a good life" (Bhalla and Thapliyal 2013). The resilience of such a frame, half a decade later, is noteworthy. Dr. Patel explains that with the money they earn surrogate mothers are "able to buy a house, educate their children and even start a small business. These are things they could only dream of before. It's a win-win situation" (Bhalla and Thapliyal 2013). Thus, the story of transnational surrogacy is framed as an event where two women who are vastly different assist one another in the maternal work of birthing and nurturing children (Lewis 2015; Pande 2014).

Like the businesses, client parents also cast surrogacy in India as a compassionate act: Antonio, quoted earlier, said, "With the money they are going to get, they are going to have a better life for them and their kids." His partner Quinn chimed in, "And what they talk about doing with the money

is quite impressive." When we asked how they had heard what the surrogate mothers do with their earnings, Quinn replied that the women's profiles they read when selecting a surrogate explain why they want to be a surrogate mother. They also depended on agency websites and journalistic accounts they read.

The information in the profiles of both surrogate mothers and egg donors—provided by the agencies—heavily shape the commissioning clients' decisions about whom to hire. James and Scott, an Australian couple in their mid-forties, spent a long time deciding about which Indian women they wanted as egg donors. In the end, they opted for an Indian woman on the "B-list" who had very little education because they thought she would benefit more from the money than a woman on the "A-list" who had at least a high school education, and therefore was likely from a family with more financial capital. When they narrowed the list down to two final candidates from the "B-list," they chose the woman who said she would use the money to further her son's education over the other childless woman.

Although a moral frame of compassion dominated our respondents' explanations for pursuing Indian surrogacy, it was clear that other factors also influenced their decision—one primary influence being the cost. Adam and Brian, for example, typed "budget surrogacy" into Google when they began to consider having children, and all the hits returned were about India, which is how they first discovered India as a destination. Phil and Colin mentioned offhandedly that they had "sticker shock" when first researching surrogacy, and loved their clinic in Delhi because it was truly "First World medicine at Third World prices." Thus, even though some of our interviewees spoke about the financial savings, they continued to frame their decision to employ Indian surrogate mothers with the language of compassion. Such language helped some clients cope with the instrumentality that drove the decision-making process in having children.



However, a few individuals were unapologetic about the surrogacy process being strictly a business transaction. For example, Richard and Keith, who live in the Midwest and were expecting twins from one Delhi-based surrogate mother, scoffed when we asked whether they were planning to meet her: "The bottom line is that these women are paid, they are held accountable. There is really no reason for us to interact with them. They get paid, we have the outcome we want."

It seems that because clients utilize surrogacy in India once, or at most twice, in their lifetimes they may be more likely to express instrumentality. Infertility assistance businesses, however, may face approbation if they express such instrumentality and, as a result, are more careful. They need to sustain their businesses and bring in more clients. For example, Dr. Patel is said to have delivered more than 650 surrogated babies from 2004 to 2014; she charges clients an average of \$25,000 to \$30,000 for the entire procedure and pays her surrogate mothers \$6,500 (Vogt 2014). In order to continue to attract clients, she necessarily must speak of how her business model assists clients and surrogate mothers equally. Surrogacy is, as she and her clients say repeatedly in various media sources, a "win-win" situation. Thus, infertility businesses in India, like Dr. Patel's Akanksha Infertility Clinic in Anand, posit themselves as social businesses, an ethical capitalism that ameliorates inequalities resulting from First World infertility and Third World poverty (Lewis 2015).

Creative Options Trust for Women (COTW) in Bangalore, where we first began fieldwork with surrogate mothers in India, has gone so far as to officially register itself as a nonprofit social work organization. Along with surrogacy services and recruiting egg donors, COTW claims that it provides a vast array of services: shelter to newborn orphans, adoption assistance to childless couples, protection of girl babies, self-employment training and job placement for women, employment and marriage assistance for widows and women divorcees, free AIDS counseling and treatment, and more.

Surrogacy, then, becomes a way by which COTW funds all these charitable interventions for the overall benefit of India's women and children.

Thus, many of our client interviewees believed themselves to be "compassionate consumers" who participated in generating social change for themselves and for working-class women and children in India. Such perceptions enable them to adopt a positive self-image invested with moral significance that testifies to their good character (Deeb-Sossa 2007; Kleinman 1996). This framing also helps couples shield themselves from accusations that they are intermingling economic activity with the intimate labor of creating a family, two worlds that are often seen as morally opposed (Zelizer 2007). Instead, by framing commercial surrogacy as compassionate consumerism, couples adopt a moral identity that allows them to navigate around threats of racism (Deeb-Sossa 2007), classism, or sexism. Yet, as we reveal, the ability to navigate around these threats is shaped by moral frames that *rely upon* racist, classist, and sexist tropes about Third World working-class women.

### Surrogate Mothers before and after Surrogacy

Most of the 70 surrogate mothers we interviewed in Bangalore had earned \$4,000, and not \$7,000 to \$8,000 as reported in media accounts. A few had been paid less than that. Some surrogate mothers drew our attention to the unfairness of the exchange because their wages fell short of the economic, personal, and social costs they had incurred. They explained that because they had to live in surrogacy dormitories during their pregnancies, their household expenses increased due to child care. Some husbands balanced the additional household tasks and wage employment if the children were ten years and older because these children took on the absent mother's household responsibilities. But younger children were unable to do so, and were sent to grandparents' homes. Still others paid friends and neighbors, or depended on these women's generosity to care for the children.



Through these frames, surrogate mothers are produced as "singular monolithic subjects" (Mohanty 1984, 333): loving, but also shy, needy, and dependent; generous and eager to help fulfill the dreams of parents-to-be, yet living in deplorable conditions and desperate to move to a better home and send their own children to better schools; happy to be in the service of others, yet nervously unwilling or unable to speak with clients, researchers, or journalists.

These frames facilitate surrogacy as an economic intervention, and inculcate upper-middle-class clients into this intimate industry while maintaining distance between the intended parents and surrogate mothers themselves. The enforced social distance between surrogate mothers and clients protects the latter from learning that the former earn less than agencies claim, and that for some mothers, surrogacy detracted from, rather than enhanced, their own children's well-being. None of the 70 surrogate mothers we interviewed were saved from economic precarity by having a child for relatively privileged clients.

This article has built upon previous theorizing on stratified reproduction and transnational surrogacy to demonstrate that the lack of economic privilege working-class Indian women experience because of their class and global race locations allows for the circulation of the ideology that they need to be rescued. This rescue then is fostered by their employment as surrogate mothers. These working-class Indian women's bodies form the material basis for the growth of transnational surrogacy as an organized intimate industry replete with legal clauses, legislation, and well-established modes of transaction. Their bodies are sites for drastic medical interventions entailing hormonal hyperstimulation and major abdominal surgery, yet surrogacy firms and middle-class families hold on to the fallacy that surrogacy is a "win-win" situation. The very structural factors that make working-class Indian women particularly suited for surrogacy also allows for the circulation of reproductive imaginaries of benevolence

and rescue from poverty. This reproductive imaginary is a myth.

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### Reflective Questions

1. What is surrogacy? How does it work? Who is paying for surrogacy? Who has legal rights to the child, and who does not? Why is surrogacy happening across national borders? What issues of power and status are wrapped up in transnational surrogacy?
2. What is surrogacy like for Indian women? Who makes medical decisions? How well informed are women about what surrogacy entails? Do Western couples speak directly with surrogates? Who speaks to and for them? How is this arrangement discussed publicly?
3. What is framing? How is framing the result of collective action? How do surrogacy agencies frame Indian surrogates? How did agencies control information about the women? How did First World parents assure themselves that they weren't exploiting the women? Why did they consider surrogacy a "win-win"? In what ways did agencies and parents consider surrogacy liberating? What is a "compassionate consumer"? What roles did altruism and compassion play in the moral framing of surrogacy?
4. Did the reality of surrogacy live up to the promises? How much were surrogates actually paid? What monetary and familial costs did living in dormitories have for them? Was surrogacy "mother friendly," as purported? How many of the seventy women interviewed were able to escape poverty through surrogacy?
5. Social movement actors cultivate moral frames to inspire people to their causes and compel social action. Identify two current social movements, one national (or international) and one local. Examine their literature, social media sites, and public appearances. Who are the social actors involved in movement? What are the dominant frames used by activists to further their cause? What is the basis of morality in those frames? How do people opposing the movements counter these moral frames? Why are *moral* frames so important to social movements?



## The Politics of Sorrow and Identity in the Aftermath of Murder

DANIEL D. MARTIN

*In one way or another, all of the selections in this book are guided by the belief that if social scientists want to understand human behavior, they must understand how people construct and define reality. More specifically, they must consider how people define the things—objects, events, individuals, groups—they encounter in their environment and interactions. These things do not have a fixed or intrinsic meaning. Rather, their meanings differ depending on how people interpret and respond to them. Even a harsh and seemingly clear-cut event such as a murder can have uncertain and varying meanings. Like other social meanings, the meaning of a homicide is constructed and negotiated by human beings and, thus, is open to new and shifting interpretations. If we want to understand the meaning of a particular murder, we need to consider how various parties define and respond to it. We also need to examine the “micro-politics” that surround it; that is, we need to recognize that different groups, such as police officers, coroners, family members, and friends often define the reality of a murder differently and subsequently advance competing claims about the identity of the victim, the meaning of his or her relationships, and the level of responsibility he or she bears for what happened. As Martin demonstrates, the facts surrounding a case of murder “do not speak for themselves.” Instead, they must be interpreted, and this interpretation is shaped by the interests of various*

*groups and organizations. The meanings that become attached to a homicide reflect individuals’ immediate practical concerns, the understandings they bring to the situation, their relationship to the victim, and the negotiations that take place as they interact with others. Martin illustrates the interpretive work involved in constructing the reality of homicide by sharing the perspectives and experiences of the parents of murdered children. In doing so, he highlights how they actively manage the identity of their deceased child, not only by challenging the unfavorable claims or actions of officials but also by constructing accounts that highlight how their child was a “good, decent, helpful, or loyal” person.*

Overall, Martin’s analysis of the talk, emotions, and identity negotiations of the parents of murdered children illustrate a number of concepts discussed in other selections in this book. For instance, the parents of murdered children build group solidarity and mark off the boundaries of culture, ethnicity, and identity through engaging in “emotion work.” Their emotional labor includes displays of anger or resentment toward individuals or organizations who treated their child unjustly, such as police officers, gang members, media outlets, or local schools. In many cases, their emotion work also includes expressions of compassion toward others who have lost a family member or friend because of a murder. In addition to engaging in emotion

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work, the parents interviewed by Martin take part in both defensive and corrective forms of "face-work" (see Selection 24). They fashion narratives that challenge unflattering appraisals of their deceased child, assert his or her positive achievements and character traits, and minimize his or her deficits. The parents of murdered children correspondingly draw upon some of the "identity talk" strategies Snow and Anderson described in their analysis of how the homeless counteract stigma and salvage positive images of self (see Selection 22).

In concluding, Martin's findings demonstrate how questions about the meaning of a murder must be answered in concrete situations—and these situations are influenced by factors such as race, class, and gender. The reality of homicide is socially constructed, and it is constructed in a number of ways, for a variety of purposes, under different social circumstances, and through various types of accounts. The meaning of a specific murder is a matter of definition, interpretation, negotiation, and often conflict, particularly for families living in oppressed communities. To borrow from Herbert Blumer, the play and fate of meanings are what is important in understanding social realities, including the reality of murder. Martin's analysis demonstrates why.

In homicide cases, facts surrounding the death of victims do not speak for themselves. Rather, interpretations of victims' involvement in the homicide as well as definitions of who and what they were at the time of that involvement must be constructed. The micro-political nature of this process is revealed as the parties engaged in this construction—police, surviving family members, coroners, mortuary personnel—advance not only different definitions of the victim, but of the victim's formal and informal associations, family, family life, biography, and identity. In this chapter, I look at how [various parties construct and manage the identities of homicide victims] . . .

Researchers have observed that identity construction by and for the dying may be precarious, paradoxical, and subject to erosion as well

as preservation (Charmaz 1991, 1994; Sandstrom 1998) . . . Unruh's (1983) analysis of "identity preservation strategies" found that those who survive the death of a loved one used one of four different strategies. First, survivors reinterpreted ordinary events, routines, and interactions in ways that highlighted personal aspects of the deceased that, though mundane, were considered defining features of identity. Second, survivors "redefined the negative," idealizing those personal qualities of the deceased considered problematic while they were alive. Third, survivors kept alive memories of the deceased by maintaining activities, rituals, or routines of which they were a part. And, finally, survivors sanctified places, objects, or projects associated with the deceased in ways that preserved the deceased's identity and survivors' memories of them.

While these processes might also be found among families of homicide victims, additional layers of complexity in the identity construction process are added as families seek to normalize the identity of the homicide victim. In cases where victims' bodies are horribly disfigured, families may find themselves at odds with police over the meaning of the victim's involvement. They may also find themselves in a contest with mortuary staff as negotiation takes place over the display of the victim's body along with the objects used to announce the victim's identity . . .

### Identity Contests with Authority

Immediately after a death, a legal and [bodily] transfer of the victim and his or her immediate belongings are made to the state, whose functionaries attempt first to determine the deceased's physical identity and then the cause of death. In contrast with White families, African-American families living in Cincinnati recounted interactions with police and other authorities who sought to discredit both the victim and the families. In several cases, media campaigns by the Cincinnati Police Department were systematically launched to discredit legal and civic claims. In a well-publicized



case, Cincinnati police killed Robert, a 26-year-old, unarmed Black man; the bullets from an officer's revolver penetrated the roof of Robert's car, striking him in the back of the head. At a meeting of the MOMS group, Robert's mother, Mrs. Lacey, an African-American homemaker in her mid-50s, talks about the official account of the shooting constructed by police:

'Cause they [police] want to point out the negatives <pause> all about the negatives. Either your son is in drugs or sold drugs, or in the gang, or your son is a troubled child—that's the police explanation for why he was killed. They don't know we [Black families] have children out here [who are] athletes. My son was an athlete <pause> going to college. He got into some trouble once, but he was <pause> it was a misdemeanor. They [police] tried to say [in the local media] it was a felony.

The identity contest in Mrs. Lacey's account pits her against police who deploy a culturally dominant "identity code": young Black man as drug dealer, gangbanger, and troubled youth. Through this activity, police attempt to piece together a formula story—an account seemingly devoid of nuance through which a discrediting "narrative identity" (Loseke 2007: 663) is constructed and used to explain the homicide. Here the identity work of the police bears the semiotic features outlined in Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock's (1996: 140) insightful discussion of "oppressive identity work." [As they point out, oppressive identity work] is oppressive not only because it only devalues others but because it denies them the power to signify their own character" . . .

Like Mrs. Lacey, other MOMS members felt like they were the targets of oppressive identity work. Observe the case of Ell, an African-American mother in her mid-50s whose 13-year-old son was killed on school premises by a 14-year-old boy while police were allegedly negligent in their safety and surveillance responsibilities at the school.

The principal came here and lied to me. Lied to my face and then the sad part is the way . . . and,

you know, I'm not a stupid person. He came and he looked all around and then he had the audacity to ask me where did your son go to school in grade school? I said he went to Bond Hill, and I know exactly what he was doin'. He was tryin' to check on my son's records to see what kind of student he was. You don't come into my house on the day my son dies tryin' to investigate what his school records are about, you know. My son didn't have anything in his school record, you know. You can't find anything on a police record so now you're going to try to go to his school records. You're not goin' to find anything there either, you know. You can't make somethin' where there's nothin'. You know what I'm saying? But that just irked me. That irked me to no end. To no end <pause> no end. The way they just, you know <pause> tryin' to make him look bad, you know. It's like, "We'll [the school] look better if we make him look bad."

. . . The visit by the deceased's middle school principal suggests that as the identities of deceased children become objects of contested meaning, identity claims-making represents not only a struggle over identity codes but a struggle more generally over "premise control." Control over basic premises regarding the victims' character, the nature of their participation in the context in which they were killed, the kinds of associations they held, or their leisurely pursuits enables the narrative construction of both sanctified and vilified identities. . . . As premises become a basis for further action (Perrow 1986: 129–130), identity claims shape decisions in police investigations, coroner decisions, funeral planning, and family events. . . .

Control of the premises for social (as opposed to legal) evidence allows for a virtual identity to be constructed through the claims-making activities of parents, police, school, and other authorities. Yet, both the identity claims that families make and the premises on which they are based are commonly situated in interaction with police who, even in the absence of evidence, may blame both the family and the victim for the homicide (Martin 2005). The kinds of identity work that families may



do in light of such a situation is both "oppositional" (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996: 141) and what I call *emancipatory identity work* insofar as it seeks not simply to subvert the dominant group's identity codes but to transcend them. Paradoxically, MOMS (Mothers of Murdered Sons) members rejected the cultural identity codes deployed by police in framing the deaths of their own children, yet relied upon these same codes in depicting violent teens or children in the community they knew to be gang members. In formulating the MOMS restorative justice program, parents in MOMS referenced depictions, signifiers, and actions commensurate with the label "street," talked about by Elijah Anderson (1999: 45–46). However, by talking about "troubled children," rather than children who were categorically bad, parents in MOMS could neutralize any dissonance arising from the adoption of this cultural identity code.

... [W]ithin the micro-order of homicide investigations, the ways in which victims are defined by police as culpable in their own deaths has post-mortem consequences for both victims and victims' families as well as for perpetrators brought to trial. Consequently, the social identities of children killed in street violence are not simply taken to the grave in static fashion. Rather, [these identities are produced through] dynamic processes in which claims and signifiers are constructed, contested, and negotiated beyond death. This process continues as families are compelled to physically identify the dead...

### The Bodies of the Dead

For victims of homicide, the construction and management of identity is done by others—including police, coroners, victims' families, mortuary staff, and tertiary parties against whom families may hold liability claims. For each of these parties, the victim's body is constituted as a social object yielding vastly different social meanings. For police and coroners, bodies represent sites of investigation. For mortuary staff, disfigured bodies represent an opportunity to display

skills at reconstruction. For family, friends, and associates, bodies of the deceased are commonly treated as sacred objects to be anointed, adorned, cremated with their ashes scattered, or, at the very least, protected from further defilement. Through these respective activities, primary actors attempt to establish the victim's "actual identity" (Goffman 1963). Because the body is both a site where the self resides and a public idiom through which it is expressed, families commonly find physical identification of the deceased particularly distressing. Below, "Mel," a middle-aged, African-American day laborer whose son was shot by police, describes a visit to the coroner's office.

It was hard to look at him the way he was. Very hard to look at him, but that was the first time I seen him really layin' . . . stretched out like that, you know. Besides the autopsy that they performed on him and then all the bullet holes in his body . . . I counted at least 19 holes in him. That was just in the front of his body. I know I counted about six in his back. It's a hard thing to look at.

An unexpected loss of a loved one proves traumatic in and of itself, and loss because of violent death imposes additional psychic hardship. Violence culminating in a radical alteration of the body represents a potential disordering and reorganization of identity, foisting on parents a situation in which they must [make sense of and account] for the death and brutalization of their child. While radical disfigurement does not necessarily constitute the annihilation of identity, mutilation may mean that the victim literally cannot be recognized, a situation compounded by the autopsy. During her interview Doris, a White office worker in her mid-40s, talked about resisting autopsy procedures to be performed on her son, shot while he was at his job in a bait store:

When I was at the morgue, you know, I was turning to leave and they're like, "Well, we have to wait until we get the autopsy reports back." And I'm like, "You're not giving my son an autopsy." They're like, "Well, we have to." I'm like, "You're



not." <pause> I called the coroner and I told him that I did not want a full autopsy done on Joe. <pause> It wasn't until I think Wednesday that I gave them permission to just do an autopsy on his chest cavity.

... In death, claims of ownership over the body are usually transferred from [the deceased person] to his or her family. Where death is due to homicide, the State temporary claims ownership until determination of cause. For parents, homicide subjects the victim's body to primary damage, extinguishing both life and important elements of identity. Through autopsy and mortuary reconstruction, the last vestiges of identity "pegged" to the body (Goffman 1959: 253) may be removed—a process of secondary damage that parents resist. Through this process, families strive to ensure that the deceased's social identity is not overshadowed by the new master status of "murder victim." They commonly find themselves, however, in an inescapable paradox. On the one hand, they may attempt to delimit physical intrusion of the victim's body and any potential threat to identity that it may represent. On the other hand, feelings of loss may heighten the sense of injustice that parents feel, leading them to push forcefully for a thorough investigation necessitating a full autopsy on which the investigation depends.

The victim's facial disfigurement, occurring either during the homicide or as a result of the autopsy, tends to be especially traumatizing for family members. More than any other body part, the face is the primary source of identity (Waskul 2002). . . . Physical abjection of the body and face is synonymous with the destruction of both physical and social identity (Kristeva 1982). This leaves survivors of the deceased in the unsettling situation of identifying with a monstrous or repulsive object that contains only remnants of a known, former identity. . . .

In cases of extreme disfigurement. . . family members may be unable to shield themselves from involvement in bodily inspection—or to provide

psychic protection against the horror that it brings—once they are compelled by funeral staff, friends, or other kin to view the corpse. In contrast to Sally's account most families in the study indicated that funeral directors were collaborative agents, helping them minimize the emotional trauma that families experienced. Margaret (White, working-class, mid-50s), whose brother-in-law brutally murdered his wife (her sister) and his children, reported:

Mr. Townson, the funeral director, pulled me aside and said, "I want you to see this before the rest get here" [other family members arriving to make funeral arrangements who would not be shown the body]. He [the perpetrator] had beaten her face, which was badly bruised and swollen and began to sink because the swelling was subsiding. He [funeral director] said that he was going to have to do a lot of reconstruction because her face was so badly battered there was no bone left in place to support it. Her head had an entry wound and was shaped like an iceberg.

When physical abjection of the body threatens to demolish a cherished identity and heighten horror, individual family members, such as Margaret, serve as human involvement shields. In circumstances such as the one above, where the emotional burden of retaining the last (gruesome) image of the deceased is deemed too heavy for all family members to bear, the role is one jointly constructed with funeral directors.

By physically reconstructing a corpse, funeral staff also engage in identity work, attempting to approximate both physical and social features formerly associated with the deceased. The display of this work is driven by both professional and organizational interests. Charmaz (1980: 197–198) observed that funeral personnel "believe in the importance of seeing the dead person as dead. They contend that in this way the reality of death cannot be overlooked and assume, moreover, that the constructed image of the deceased constitutes 'real' and appropriate confrontation with death." . . .



For families in this study, most decisions about the display of victim's bodies were shaped largely by the funeral director's recommendations. These decisions were also shaped by family estimations of how the deceased wished to be remembered—that is, guesses as to the identity announcements that the victims themselves might make in death. As I explore in the next section, these were not the only considerations made by families who, on rare occasions, would disregard the presumed wishes of both the funeral director and the deceased.

### Burying Identity

... Because a deceased person can no longer actively participate in constructing his or her identity, it must be either stocked with physical and biographical materials already in the family's possession or completely reconstructed. Thus, known stories through which the deceased can be ritually located as a social object must be told, or formerly untold stories must be revealed. The result is a narrative reproduction or reconstruction of the deceased's identity. While the body of the deceased may be the primary prop around which this narration occurs ... personal objects belonging to the victim also serve as symbols of the victim's self, family life, group affiliations, and shared memories. "Laura," a middle-class, African-American mother and homemaker in her late 50s, lost her 25-year-old son as he was killed by an intruder in his apartment. Laura reported:

I think the hardest thing for me to do was to go to his house and pick out a suit that he had to be buried in. To me, that was hard because like I said, my son was a dresser. So, you know, I had to think like him for a moment 'cause I know, you know, he's a dresser. I mean his socks and underwear matched, you know, everything matched.

... Clothes, in particular, are a major source of identity for the dead. To remove clothes is to make the body indistinct from other bodies. To give away or bury clothes is to bury identity, an impossible task for some parents.

Ell: I cannot get rid of it. I've got two pairs of his shoes hangin' up on nails down in the basement. You know he was so happy to get those shoes 'cause he wasn't a clothes person ... they hangin' up on the nail 'cause ... that smell. ... I got to have that smell of him, you know?

As Ell's words reveal, a parent's memories of the deceased's clothed appearance are not simply visual but fully somatic, and in ways that evoke nostalgia. Olfaction for parents like Ell becomes an "idealizing activity" that transforms memory into a set of "experienced and relivable sensations" (Waskul, Vannini, and Wilson 2009: 11). Where symbols of the deceased's identity are removed, as clothes and other belongings are given away, parents find that the most powerful reminders of the victim—those constituting somatic experience—are eclipsed.

Given the narrative identity that most families construct around the personal objects of the dead, parents who fashioned identities of the deceased by highlighting their status as "murder victim" were rare. Cindy, a White fast food worker in her late 40s, discusses the use of her son's body as a heuristic device for educating youth on the effects of street violence:

And we took them [deceased's clothes] over and dropped them off at the funeral home so they [mortuary staff] could dress him. ... I went over about one o'clock to see him to make sure and I had pretty much decided that if, you know, if he could be shown at all [a concern because of visible bullet holes in the head and hands], he needed to be shown because the kids, the kids were so young that they had no concept of the violence and what it causes and I wanted his friends to see, you know, so they wouldn't go out and play with guns. So that they would avoid people with guns and I thought that was the best way to do it.

Cindy's decision is reminiscent of one made in the 1955 case of Emmett Till, whose mother displayed the 14-year-old's brutalized corpse, exposing Southern racism (Whitfield 1988). In such cases, the body is used [as a vehicle] to communicate a



moral lesson and deter future violence. The victim's narrative identity is then situated within a funeral context having dual frames: one that is largely biographical, granting full personhood to the victim, and another that is micro-political, crafted for a cause beyond the confines of the memorial service. Where stories about the victim exemplify a character above reproach, the narrative tie of personal stories to moral lessons may be unproblematic . . .

At all funerals, objects animating the body may serve both as markers of identity and as "tie signs" (Goffman 1961: 194), symbolizing relations between the living and the deceased. Such objects may at once be symbols not only of personal but also collective identity. At the funeral of a homicide victim, objects such as cigarettes, gang colors (bandanas), or bags of marijuana play host to a kind of semiotic dualism. For parents, they are indicators that the deceased was cherished by others outside the family. As markers of respectability, however, they may also indicate that the victim was a person of disrepute. The same may be said, of course, about the size and composition of the funeral audience:

ELL: At my son's funeral three rows of gang members were sittin' there. Three rows of gang members were sittin' there, but they respected my son. . . . They respected him because they knew he had love. They knew that he had family. They knew that he had goals. They knew he had dreams. They respected that and I tried to hug as many of them as I could, knowin' that they were gang members. I just tried to hug them and they [pause]... Each one of them stood up to hug me back.

The announcement of a victim's social ties to known deviant groups, such as gangs, would appear to trap parents between normative demands for respectability and displays of solidarity with the deceased's friends. The quote from Ell suggests that families may either selectively attend to expressions of love, where the deceased is the focal point, or simply suspend conventional rules of respectability. . . .

Parents from both MOMS and POMC (Parents of Murdered Children) reported the attendance of young men sporting gang colors at the funerals of their sons. These attendees proceeded to leave bandanas, crucifixes, and other items in the coffin. While such displays are expressions of solidarity with both the victim and his family, they are also forms of identity work, constructing the victim as a social object through signifying acts and symbols. To again quote Schwalbe and his coauthors (2000: 119): "Identity work is a kind of semiotic bricolage wherein people create themselves as social objects by fabricating signs of the self out of whatever resources they can find. Though if necessary, people will also create the tools—the signs, codes, and rites of affirmation—that allow them to make of themselves whatever they would like to be." Others have referred to this process as "selfing," observing how the body and its physical presentation can be used to signify the self (Baerveldt and Voettermans 1996).

At funerals, selfing may be orchestrated by members of . . . the groups in which the deceased's social identities were situated. Selfing by each group (family, friends, gang members) entails the ongoing construction of the victim's identity as well as its sanctification—a process highlighting how the deceased was good, decent, helpful, or loyal. Because the basis for evaluation between these groups significantly differs, the process inevitably yields competing definitions of the victim's identity, self, and social loyalties. Through the selfing and sanctification process, then, a narrative identity of the victim is constructed, but it is constructed in ways privileging the groups and perspectives to which the narrators subscribe. . . .

### Sanctification, Accounts, and Postmortem Identity Work

The narrative construction of a victim's identity is, foremost, an act of retrospective interpretation (Rudy 1986)—a recollection of events and experiences told through an interpretive lens representing the deceased's lived experience in light of the



homicide. Family members commonly accomplish the ongoing selfing and sanctification of a victim's identity through nostalgia, cultivating a "continuity of identity" (Davis 1979: 31; Wilson 2005). What is commonly offered in this construction is an account of the victim's life, one framing the homicide in ways that exonerate the victim while placing blame on other actors. The degree to which accounts are ratified, questioned, or discredited depends in part on the nature and context within which the deceased's virtual self is presented. Family gatherings, support groups, and police investigations all provide a "scenic presence" for presenting narrative identity, though each grants a different level of "narrative control" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 171, 190). For families of the deceased, even funerals may be problematic if the deceased has left little evidence of living a respectable or at least minimally problematic life. What emerges under such conditions are sanctifying accounts varying in the kind and amount of "narrative editing" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 113) a family does. That is, account-giving is itself a kind of identity work—work shaped by the victim's own biography as well as the context in which that work is done.

### Achievement Accounts

In everyday conversations and support group discussions, as well as in the interview process, sanctification is a dramaturgical exercise in which grieving parties attempt to construct the best possible social face for the victim. . . . To sanctify the deceased's identity, stories must be offered showing how the person is unique or set apart. Sanctifying narratives, however, must simultaneously include stories that also humanize the deceased. In cases where the victim was a star athlete, exceptional student, or volunteer in community work, families can readily draw on verifiable evidence for sanctification. Consider, for example, statements made by two mothers of children killed in street shootings:

Barbara (White, working-class, late 40s): Bobby [aged 13] got straight As all the way through grade

school. . . . he graduated on the honor roll from middle school. In high school, he told me, he said, "Mom, I want to get straight As again so that I can get a scholarship 'cause I want to be an architect." [He had a] home tutor who came to the funeral home and he said, "You know, I was going to call you after school started and find out how [Bobby] was doing because if he was still having trouble with math, I was going to volunteer to be his home tutor again. I've never seen a kid that wanted to learn as bad as he did." And he said he was a joy to work with.

Winnie (African-American, working-class, late 30s): Ben [aged 17] was the type of person that would hide behind the door or if I'm layin' in the bed, he'll run and jump on me and grab me, always playin' practical jokes. But he was . . . very . . . big. One time I was sick and he would dive on top of me and my mother had to tell him, "You don't hurt her," and he had to be careful cause he was big, you know. He was just real muscular, you know, a linebacker. He was, like I said, an all-star football player. He had won trophies and he was goin' places. They had an obituary with him holdin' his football jersey—he was going places.

Here parents offer evidence of some special, positive attribute possessed by their child. I refer to these kinds of accounts as . . . achievement accounts. While no claim can be made as to the exact distribution of these accounts, they represent a common motif at funerals and other formal gatherings. Barbara and Winnie identify their sons as unique; the two mothers also describe what appear to be minor personal deficiencies or idiosyncrasies. The juxtaposition of these two narrative streams remains unproblematic where deceased children were well-liked, in good community standing, and possessed only minor character flaws, bad habits, or idiosyncrasies. Arguably, claims about the deceased's exceptionalism are best supported where the recipients of the storytelling see the victim as human. Exaggerated claims portraying the victim as a saint may be



politely accepted at the funeral, but are narratively unstable when examined in general conversation. Of course, not all families have the biographical resources from which they can construct an account demonstrating achievement [so they] must rely on other strategies.

### “Deficit” Accounts

When the life course of the deceased reveals the victim to be conventional, unremarkable, or lacking success, “deficit accounts” may be constructed. Deficit accounts highlight the social, emotional, cultural, economic, and/or physical deficits that victims faced, portraying victims as long-suffering or virtuous in light of their experience. Nona offers such an account of her son, Danny:

When he was small, it took him a long time to become active like other kids because when he was about six or seven . . . he was in the hospital . . . for about a week or so, and he was like in the first or second grade . . . When he got out, they [doctors] said he can't run. He can't jump. He can't ride a bike. He can't roller skate, you know. He pretty much couldn't do anything. He could go back to school, but he couldn't go out on the playground 'cause if he got jolted or anything it could cause trauma to his head. . . . [After] two or three months of this the doctor said, “Okay, he can go out, but he can't roughhouse. He can go out and play, you know, but not get bumped around.” So the teacher took the kids in the class and said, “Now Danny's going to be allowed to get back on the playground, but he's not going to be able to get bumped or pushed down or anything like that. So no [playing] Ninja Turtles, nothing like that. You've got to be easy with him.” So the kids said, “Okay.” And she said she walked out on the playground, and she said there's this huddle of kids and Danny's standing in the middle of it and they're all pressed up against him so that nobody pushes him down or anything [laughs]. It was funny because . . . they were still playing, but they're just going to make sure that he's never going to fall over. They were real protective of him.

Danny was targeted in a drive-by shooting while sitting on his girlfriend's front porch. The centerpiece of Nona's narrative is not evidence of exceptional achievement, *per se*, but Danny's frailty and the claim that he is beloved by friends. Where Danny's physical inability might serve as a justification for a lack of status or athletic prowess, here the deficiency is heralded with dramatic effect. Thus deficit accounts glorify common, everyday activity by virtue of the obstacles that people overcome in performing them. Accounts of exceptionalism and deficit accounts represent a continuum of achievement in stories told about victims. Yet both kinds of accounts may be represented in a narrative identity where victims are shown to overcome adversity and then later accumulate achievements. Not all victims, of course, have biographical resources enabling families to construct such success stories. In situations where a family's daily, social location compels children to abide by the “street code” (Anderson 1999), to deal drugs, or to engage in street violence or other forms of deviance, [other types of] accounts may be used in the sanctification of identity. . . .

### Furtive Accounts, Narrative Covering, and Identity Reclamation

In mourning a dead child, parents and surviving siblings can find solace in family, friends, and neighbors. In mourning a “deadly child”—one dangerous to the community—families may have few supporters. This appears to be especially true where children have been killed in street violence during their participation in career deviance (especially the drug economy). For families of deceased children who were perpetrators as well as recipients of violence, sanctification becomes a strategic construction. Consider, for example, the case of David, a drug dealer in Cincinnati shot and killed by police:

Mattice (African-American mother, mid-40s, homemaker): David was dead. Twenty-six cartridges they found on the ground. Nineteen holes



in him. He couldn't have been alive when they got there. He was dead. All I . . . when I see his body down there at the morgue. . . . All I pray is that one of them bullets just took him out and he didn't feel the rest of them bullets 'cause I just pray that he didn't feel the rest of them bullets 'cause they beat him. His head was bashed in, a smashed skull. The back of his head he had a split back here so deep in his head. MOMS was sayin' why if that boy had a gun they beat him first? Why didn't they get him and handcuff him, but they so busy beatin' that boy they didn't even try to see what he got if he had the gun. Why they do that? They wanted to kill him.

While the handling of her son by police is brutal, what Mattice does not share in the interview, nor in interaction with MOMS members during a support group meeting, is the reason police arrived at the scene. David was observed by a local resident extracting a late payment for crack cocaine from a customer at a Cincinnati apartment building known as "Crack Hotel." When the customer reported that he didn't have the money, David proceeded to kick the customer's gold teeth out, anticipating that the gold could be fenced at a local pawnshop.

Three police officers arrived at the scene, one of them yelling, "He has a gun!" Within a matter of seconds all three cops emptied their clips, shooting David 19 times. The bullets penetrated the palms of David's hands, lending support to the theory that the police had shot an unarmed man. Rather than make a full disclosure, Mattice constructs a "furtive account" providing a narrative cover for her son's participation in the local underground economy. Here the act of "narrative covering" involves the total suppression of discrediting information that would otherwise destroy a sanctifying account . . . [The adjoining portion of Mattice's account of her son's death] included the following:

He wasn't a bad kid. He always had respect for his elders. Every time I see him even after he was wrong . . . every time I seen him he'd say, "Hi

mama, how ya doin'?" He always gave me a hug, you know, always was respectful. I mean, I don't care where I was at and what was goin' on. He was just always a sweet kid to me. And he always loved little kids . . . and he made sure he came to all our family barbecues and he had his friends over.

Mattice opaquely alludes to David's troubled life, noting that they maintained their relationship "even after he was wrong." Though both David's mother and other MOMS members know he was a drug dealer, the story she tells of David is not that of a gangster but of a loving, caring son. Information about his "bill collection" belies this characterization and is therefore strategically managed. Under conditions such as those above, the sanctification of identity commonly assumes the form of an identity reclamation project. That is, the victims' identities are reclaimed and rehabilitated in ways emphasizing whatever hidden, positive qualities victims possessed. Identity reclamation in the case of David is required precisely because of his participation in the underground economy where violence is both normative and rational. When little community evidence exists to support the cherished identity claims made about the deceased, parents can selectively draw on more pleasant memories . . .

In "furtive accounts," identity reclamation proceeds by completely suppressing discrediting information. In cases of "narrative slippage" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 109), where alternative story lines developed by other actors discredit the victim, families may have few strategies to rely on. In dealing with a local newspaper that had printed a story alleging that her brother, Matt, had ties to a known drug dealer, Susan, aged 30, who is White, has held jobs as a bartender and server and now stables horses, explained:

I think I did interviews on [television channels] Four, Six, and Ten. I was real into fixing what they were saying because they kept messing it up and it was making me mad. . . . They printed something else in the newspaper that was wrong. They



printed an article in the other paper, and I wrote the editor and blasted him.

The imputation made by the paper was that Matt was involved in a "drug-deal-gone-bad" while partying at a house known to be a major drug distribution center. Especially in cases where official agencies have the function of providing stories, the narrative covering of families may be tenuous and easily fractured. As Susan's statement indicates, alternative story lines that make sanctification impossible must be met with a full frontal assault based on complete repudiation.

The article that Susan submitted to the newspaper concluded: "I remember that he would tell you he loved you . . . that's pretty amazing for a sibling. I remember that he couldn't stand it when people argued. I remember that he was a great pool player. I remember that he had a group of friends who loved him and will always miss him—I'm very glad he was surrounded by those people." Where the repudiation of competing narratives is a necessary condition for sanctifying troubled identities, ultimately these furtive accounts must establish the last viable identity of the deceased if sanctification is to be achieved.

When there is no guarantee that narrative leverage over alternative story lines can be exercised, families facing discrediting information must create or adopt stories that are so exclusive that they are virtually indisputable. While the construction of "anticipated futures" might logically support sanctification in other cases, the life trajectories of truly troubled youths like David's above may be easily disputed. The retention of narrative control is less problematic when parents construct deeply personal, spiritual narratives integrating symbols that are publicly or culturally recognized. For example, in a television interview Dahla, a middle-aged African-American mother who works on the cleaning staff in her own apartment building, recounts events on the day of her son's homicide:

I remember that Friday before his death I went to the grocery store and I cried a lot all day that

day. I don't know why and . . . I mean, it was so bad so I had to leave my groceries. I couldn't . . . I just couldn't finish my shoppin'. Still no idea nothin' like that would happen, you know. I just couldn't figure out why I was cryin' so much. I was shopping for a big block party, I came home and dozed off. I was asleep at 11:00 at night. I was layin' across the bed asleep. Jermaine came in and he said, "Mom," he said, "I'm gettin' ready to go." I opened my eyes and I said, "Okay." I said, "Jermaine, make sure you get back here in the mornin'." I said, "You know we got a lot to do," and I opened my eyes and we were talkin' for a minute, and it was like I saw a glow behind his ear, and I remember him with that like a halo and I kinda smiled at him and I said, "Okay, you better make sure you get back here in the mornin'." He said, "Okay," so I kinda dozed back off again and he said, "Mom," I said, "What is it?" you know? And I said, "Why are you lookin' at me like that?" He had the strangest look, and he said, "Mom, I love you." I said, "I love you," too.

. . . Dahla's story is one packed with symbols that she retrospectively interprets as signs of her son's impending death: her inexplicable crying, Jermaine's "halo," and the affirmation of a loving relationship that she catalogs as the "final goodbye." The account gains sociological significance once it is situated in Dahla's life circumstances. A religious woman of little material means, Dahla worries deeply about the kids in her neighborhood who she reports are "dealing crack," "carrying guns," and "seem to loiter a lot." Yet her narrative construction of Jermaine is of a young man going out on the town for the night, an activity that remains unquestioned in her account. The construction of Jermaine's narrative identity is one accomplished through a story involving presaging events. While not all MOMS members . . . are believers, Dahla's account (and narrative control) remained unchallenged.

Where these challenges might occur, the account's narrative structure precludes investigation. Because accounts involving presaging events tend



to involve only the narrator or events that are temporally distant, they are indisputable. Of course, even where narrative control in sanctifying an identity is completely retained, the stories that are crafted may not necessarily be believed. . . .

### Virtual Selfing, Reselfing, and Fictive Storytelling

The identity work of surviving family members entails a series of narrative occasions where functionaries including police, coroners, funeral home directors, school officials, insurance representatives, and court officials, as well as friends and neighbors, tender claims about the victim [of a killing]. Where claims-making represents an identity contest over homicide victims, each claimant may be regarded by all other parties as engaged in "fictive storytelling" (Snow and Anderson 1987). That is, identity work for the dead includes "the narration of stories about one's past, present, and future experiences and accomplishments . . . [and] have a fictive character to them . . . they range from minor exaggerations to fanciful claims and fabrications" (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1358–1359). In situations where conflicting claims are made, facts, fictions, and embellishments are matters of perspective, depending on one's point of view, loyalties, and relationship to the victim. Under such conditions, claimants are engaged in virtual selfing, deploying symbols representing a self no longer able to collaborate in its own [construction]. This is also true where all parties honor identity claims about the victim. The self of the deceased is represented or indexed as a particular kind of social object that would have been available to be interacted with were the deceased still alive. Through their narratives, parents, friends, and other family members [engage in identity talk that keeps] the deceased symbolically alive. . . . Within this process, private stories of the homicide victim may be shared, vicariously experienced, and entered into collective memory [in a way that allows his or her identity to be sanctified].

In "oppressive othering" (Schwalbe et al. 2000), families may face a variety of microstructural

constraints in sustaining and managing the narrative identity of the dead. In situations where police and other officials blame victims for their own demise, families may cull "furtive accounts," suppressing discrediting information about them. Here, victims' identities are not so much managed but reconstructed as surviving family members reposition, deselect, emphasize, or fabricate pieces of the victim's biography. Identity reclamation projects of this kind represent a form of virtual reselfing. . . .

For families in this study, the management of grief is part of everyday life. Because police, community, friends, and distant kin may assign varying degrees of responsibility [and blame] for the homicide to the victim or the victim's family, the loss may not be acknowledged, validated, or mourned . . . (Martin 2005). In such a context, families experience "disenfranchised grief" (Doka 1989: 4), [or grief that is not acknowledged by society]. In cases where a victim led a deviant lifestyle, families must selectively and creatively restock his or her narrative identity with sanctifying stories [to make] that identity publicly acceptable—and privately, a source of comfort. Thus, as a vehicle for reconstructing, rehabilitating, and maintaining a postmortem identity in collective memory, virtual reselfing mitigates disenfranchised grief.

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### Reflective Questions

1. How did the parents featured in this selection manage the identity of their deceased child? What types of “face-work” (see Selection 24) and “identity talk” (see Selection 22) did they engage in? When and why did they have to draw upon deficit accounts or furtive accounts rather than achievement accounts? What is disenfranchised grief? When are families of murdered children more likely to experience this form of grief?
2. How do parents make sense of a tragedy such as the murder of their child? How do third-party interpretations and interventions influence their interpretations of the meaning of the event? For instance, how are they affected by the interpretations of pastors, police officers, doctors, school officials, or counselors? Do parents always or necessarily accept these third-party interpretations? How do they work express and work out their disagreements with third parties?
3. Think of an unexpected death that has occurred in your family or in the family of a friend. What emotions did it evoke? What kind of disruptions did it cause? How did it affect the emotional life of surviving family members? Did third parties (e.g., therapists, doctors, police officers, hospice workers) get involved in interpreting the meaning of the death? If so, how did they define the situation? Were their definitions accepted or challenged by family members?
4. Listen to one or two episodes of the podcast entitled “Serial,” which focuses on a murder in Baltimore (see <https://serialpodcast.org/>). How does this program illustrate Dan Martin’s assertion that the “facts surrounding the death of victims do not speak for themselves”? How does the program highlight the “politics of sorrow and identity” that are provoked by a murder? Why is it so difficult for the journalist featured in the “Serial” podcast to determine what happened in the murder case she is investigating?